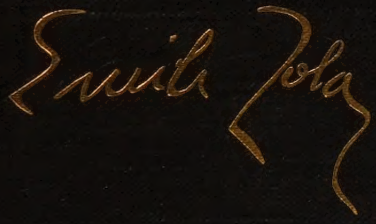
Emile Zola

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ÉMILE ZOLA

LA TERRE

Translated from the French
BY
ERNEST DOWSON

With an Essay by
HARRY THURSTON PECK

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LA TERRE

NOTE

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The Publishers.

ÉMILE ZOLA

By Harry Thurston Peck

Had Émile Zola died some fifteen years ago,[1] the comments and appreciations called forth by his death would very largely have had for their main themes the peculiar theory of fiction-writing which he so passionately upheld, the merits of the naturalistic movement, of which he was the guiding force, and finally, those literary productions in which alike the theory and the practice of literary Naturalism received a concrete demonstration. The pages of his controversial monographs, *Le Roman Expérimental* and *Les Romanciers Naturalistes*, would have been restudied by the critics, and the views expressed in them would have been again attacked, defended and discussed with all the heat engendered by a novel cause that is still *sub iudice*.

To-day the note of interest in that bygone controversy is no longer sounded, even as a reminiscence. Not even the death of the great master has revived the curious feeling of astonishment and incredulity that passed like a wave over so many minds when Zola first enunciated the formula whereby he thought that he had transmuted the indefinable magic of an art into the precise and definite dulness of a science. The years which have passed since then have long ago deprived his theory of even its piquant flavour of originality. His belief that literature is comparable, not to painting or sculpture or music, as the case may be, but to anatomy and physiology; that the novelist is

[1] Written in 1892.

a demonstrator; that his study is a laboratory; and that he can, by observation and research, illumined by imagination, arrive at new and unsuspected truths possessing scientific instinct and artistic value—all these assertions were whistled down the wind so many years ago as to make the simple statement of them now appear preposterous. An artist's theory of his own creative processes is never of much interest or worth; nor in the long run does the world care much about the fancied method or technique through which memorable things are done. It is the purest folly to analyse an inspiration or to attempt the vivisection of elusive genius. For, at the very last, one must be judged by what he has in fact achieved, and not at all by the particular means through which achievement is accomplished. So if Zola, when he sat down to his desk each day to write the four pages which constituted his diurnal task, delighted to regard himself as a biologist and not a novelist, as a demonstrator in anatomy and not an artist, that circumstance possesses no more real importance to the world at large than the fact that Dumas sometimes found it necessary to wear jack-boots and a long scarlet coat before he could compose with fluency, or that Flaubert could do no literary work until he had arrayed himself in velvet. These were idiosyncrasies of remarkable men, and they have a personal interest as being bits of intimate and curious gossip. Our knowledge of them does not, however, affect in the most imperceptible degree our balanced and matured opinion of either *L'Assommoir* or *Monte Cristo* or *Madame Bovary*. It is not what Zola thought about himself for which we care. It is rather by his completed work, in whatsoever way it may have been produced, that we judge him and assign to him his place in the Pantheon of creative genius.

Zola has been most wofully misunderstood outside of France by those whose judgments have no reference to careful knowledge. By many he has been condemned offhand as one who sought for pornographic notoriety because it promised him pecuniary profit. He has been accused of deliberately striving to secure success by sensational and unworthy means, by pandering to pruriency and becoming for pay a sort of literary seneschal to sensuality. In other words, they would not discriminate between Zola grimly and powerfully working out a great, though terrible, conception, and such enervating disciples of commercial lubricity as Adolphe Belot and Paul Ginisty. Others, again, such as Max Nordau, would have us see in Zola not a conscious trader in literary nastiness, but an unconscious pervert, essentially neurotic, "a high-class degenerate with some peculiarly characteristic stigmata which completely established the diagnosis" afflicted with onomatomania and corprolalia. How utterly untrue are both of these detestable hypotheses, a very brief consideration of the facts will serve to show. In the first place, we must consider the literary movement in which he became at last the dominant and directing influence; and then we must recall the circumstances of his own career.

Realism as a literary motive is no new phenomenon. It is as old as Euripides and Alciphron among the Greeks. It was developed almost to its very fullest possible expression by Petronius among the Romans. After the Renaissance it is seen in the picaresque romances which represent a reaction from the stately, tedious tales of chivalry, just as in Fielding it represents a like reaction against the fine-spun sentimentalism of Richardson. But it can scarcely be regarded as embodying a conscious purpose or a definite theory before the early decades of the

nineteenth century, when Henri Beyle began, under the pseudonym of "Stendhal," to dissect with an unshaken, ruthless hand the society that he saw about him, laying bare as with a surgeon's knife the hideous ulcers, the angry flesh and the rotting bones which others had so decorously hidden beneath the flowers of their fancy. Historically, it may be that Rousseau in his *Confessions* gave the first suggestion of the tremendous force which lies in naked truth; but if so, it was only a suggestion; and in fiction, at any rate, the beginnings must be traced to Stendhal. Realism, however, was not a creation or a rediscovery of any one particular man. Its germ was in the air. It was and is essentially consistent with the whole tone of modern thought, which limits the scope of the imagination, rejects illusions and demands in a spirit of hardy skepticism to view the thing that is, rather than the thing that seems to be. Democracy in politics, rationalism in theology, materialism in philosophy and realism in literature, are very closely linked together; and they are, one and all, simply different phases of the same mood and the same mental attitude toward life. The centuries of dreaminess have gone by forever, and to-day man looks with keen, unclouded vision into the verities of his existence, asking no one to prophesy smooth things, but banishing illusions, uncovering nakedness, and facing with a certain hard composure born of cynicism the ghastly facts that render human life so terrible.

This being so, it is not surprising that whithersoever we may turn in the history of modern fiction we find traces of the tendency away from the romantic, and not least of all in the very romanticists themselves. Even as early as Chateaubriand, whom literary historians are wont to style "the Father of Romanticism," you can detect resem-

blances to the later development of Realism, and even of Naturalism. His curious, nauseating book, *René*, is from one point of view almost the prototype of *A Rebours;* for in each of these apparently antithetical studies the central theme of morbid egoism affects the reader in precisely the same way, so that René is morally the twin brother of Des Esseintes. Indeed, Chateaubriand's debilitating story goes even farther and invokes in certain of its episodes the stark monstrosity upon what Mendès in our own time reared the structure of that shameful and vertiginous delirium, *Zo'har;* and in Victor Hugo, too, there are innumerable chapters that are realistic in the fullest meaning of the word. A single scene of *Notre Dame*, where in the Cour des Miracles all the leprous, loathsome life of the social sewer is revealed to us by an effective *tour de force*, may be safely set beside anything that Zola ever wrote for its sheer lavishness in squalour, its multitudinous heaping up of sordid and unsavoury details, and a certain breadth and sweep in its vivid rhyparography which render it a sort of minor epic of the slums.

The general drift of the realistic movement from Stendhal to Flaubert is too well known for recapitulation here. We see it mingled with idealistic tendencies in the colossal life-work of Balzac; we find it meretriciously, yet most effectively, appearing in *Germinie Lacerteux* of the brothers Goncourt, a book which doubtless gave to Zola many a subtle hint; it reaches absolute perfection with *Madame Bovary*, into which novel Flaubert laboriously distilled the thought and observation and minutely technical stylistic preciosity of a life time. Realism, as such, can never go beyond what Flaubert carefully wrought for us in this one exquisitely-finished etching, of which every line is bitten out as by an acid upon metal, and

of which, in consequence, the sombre memory can never die. Nothing that Stendhal wrote, no single work of Balzac even, is comparable with this depressing masterpiece of Gustave Flaubert, whose art is flawless as a gem, and whose accurate dissection of the human soul is as disquieting as the sting of an awakened conscience. After Flaubert came Zola, not to work further miracles in the name of Realism, but to give to Realism a new development and to call it Naturalism.

It should be always borne in mind that Emile Zola never was, in any sense, Parisian. It is only on his mother's side, indeed, that he was French. His father was of Italian origin. His grandmother was a Greek of Corfu. The influence of atavism, which he himself selected as the central motive of his most striking studies, is clearly seen in Emile Zola. From his Italian father, the successful engineer and would-be author, came the ambition for great achievement, the love of letters, the passion and energy of an intense nature, and the imagination of a tragic poet. To the Greek strain in him is to be ascribed an instinctive love of beauty, which by a curious psychological permutation he displays so often in an inverted form. From his Norman mother came the steadiness and shrewdness which stamp the *bourgeoisie* of Northern France. His childhood, like that of Balzac, was passed wholly *en province*, away from Paris, in the freedom and healthfulness of the country; and it was only when the years of early manhood came that the youthful Zola was thrust into the strife and turmoil of Parisian life to make his own way, quite unfriended and pitifully poor in the most beautiful and most heartless city of our modern world. Some account of the squalid years through which he lived in that depressing period he gave

himself not long ago in these very pages; yet even he was chary of recalling too particularly all he saw and felt and suffered. In the foul environment of an *hôtel borgne* he beheld about him every type of want and degradation and debauchery. His eyes perpetually rested on strange scenes of sin and shame in that underworld where men and women herd together, reduced by pitiless despair to the condition of mere animals, knowing no law but the law of their own appetites and preying upon one another to satisfy their hunger, their greed, or the craving of their elemental lusts. His senses felt the heavy burden of physical distress in all the sights and sounds and smells of that unsavoury habitation. The greasy stairs, the oozing walls, the pungent stenches as from a wild beast's lair, the darkness even at midday, the wailing of diseased and dying children, the vociferous obscenities of the brutal bully, the yell of the enraged prostitute who is cheated of her hire, and the whimpering and maundering of the sodden drunkard on the landing—who that has once set foot within the walls of such a place for even a brief moment has not had the loathsome memory of it burned into his brain forever?

Yet for two long years amid these scenes of physical and moral horror into which he had come straight from the sweet tranquillity of the sunlit meadows, young Zola lived and learned by heart the lesson of it all. Even then the creative impulse was strong upon him. At night (the only time that was his own) he shut himself within his miserable room, and when he could afford the luxury of a candle he wrote, with fingers numbed by cold, such stories as would in imagination free him most completely from the squalors that oppressed him. He was still an idealist at heart, and perhaps the illusions of his boyhood

still cast their spell upon him; for there was as yet no trace in either subject or in style of the Zola whom the world best knows. Romantic fancies came most readily from his pen, and, strange as it may appear, he even gave his thoughts expression in poetic form. At last, however, his circumstances gradually improved. He secured a very humble place in the publishing house of Hachette, and in 1864 saw his first book issue from the press. This book was the collection entitled *Contes à Ninon*, than which nothing could be more unlike the later Zola. It brought him nothing in the way of money, but it made him friends, and he began to write ephemeral articles for the press while still continuing his work in fiction. Entrusted with the art criticism in the *Figaro*, he wrote with a boldness and a vigorous independence which defied restraint, so that he soon lost the post in gaining enemies, among them the editor himself, the influential Villemessant. Almost at the same time, a novel of his, *La Confession de Claude*, to which the censorship objected, led to the severance of his connection with Hachette, so that for a time he was once more thrown upon his own resources, the precarious earnings of his pen. These facts alone are quite sufficient to convince a reasonable mind that Zola from the very outset of his career possessed the courage of his convictions, and that no man was less likely than he to sell his literary conscience for a price.

Success came to him very slowly. He was long in finding what it was he wished to do, and in concentrating his intensely energetic nature on the task. The first clear light that dawned upon him was when he wrote *Thérèse Raquin*, forever to be ranked among his masterpieces, and standing almost alone as a searching, horrifying study of remorse, of which Vapereau remarks that it depicts "adult-

ery taking refuge in murder and finding only agony." Yet remarkable as is this novel, its interest for us is less than that inspired by the first of the Rougon-Macquart series, *La Fortune des Rougon,* which appeared in 1871. With this book the author once for all sets foot upon sure ground, and in the plan which he had outlined two years before, he shows a consciousness of his own great powers and boldly challenges comparison with Balzac.

In setting forth his purpose in commencing this *Histoire Naturelle et Sociale d'une Famille sous le Second Empire* he wrote of it as follows:

> I desire to explain how a single family, a little group of human beings, comes into relations with society at large, as it increases by begetting and giving birth to ten or twenty individuals, who, though at first sight they seem quite dissimilar, when analysed reveal how intimately they are bound together, since heredity has laws as well as mathematics. The members of the family Rougon-Macquart, the one group that it is my purpose to depict, have as a family trait the gnawing of lust, of appetite that leaps to its gratification. Historically they are a part of the people; they make themselves felt by contemporary society; they rise to see spheres of life by that characteristically modern impulse which the lower classes feel; and thus they explain the Second Empire by their individual histories.

In these words Zola introduced that remarkable group of twenty novels, beginning with *La Fortune des Rougon* and ending in 1893 with *Le Docteur Pascal.* To this group belongs the very best of all that Zola did. When it was finished he had done all that makes him a distinctive figure in the world of letters. The plan of the series, sketched in 1869, was based upon a genealogy which he had carefully worked out. In this genealogy the start-

ing point is with Pierre Rougon of Plassans, his half-brother, Antoine Macquart, and his half-sister, Ursula Macquart. The mother of the three developed a congenital neurotic disorder, which appears and reappears in her descendants of two generations, these being the principal characters of the different books. Lisa, in *Le Ventre de Paris,* exhibits a clinging, cloying sensuality; Gervaise, in *L'Assommoir,* reverts to the alcoholism of her grandfather; Nana, in the novel of that name, typifies triumphant harlotry; Jacques, in *La Bête Humaine,* is cursed with homicidal mania; while in the Rougon branch of the family, the protagonists exhibit an intense ambition, as for money in *L'Argent,* for scientific achievement as in *Docteur Pascal,* for political power in *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon,* where Zola has drawn with a sure, firm touch the portrait of Napoleon Third's powerful minister, Eugène Rouher. These are but a few of the ramifications of the Rougon-Macquart stock; yet it will be seen, even from this incomplete enumeration, how many sides of life the author necessarily touches in delineating them —from the garret, the *brasserie* and the gutter, to the camp, the Bourse and the imperial palace.

Some timid, twittering literary scribblers have sapiently asked of late whether Zola's works will live. The question is the acme of fatuity. That all he wrote will live, in the sense that it will be generally read, is, of course untrue. In this sense it can not be said of any modern author, outside, perhaps, of a group of three or four, that his work will live. Zola was a very prolific writer, and his successes were surpassed in number by his failures. Even now few persons who are not professional students of literature know anything of *La Confession de Claude* or *Madeleine Férat* or *Celle Qui M'Aime;* and

before long, many of Zola's other novels, such as *La Joie de Vivre* and *L'Œuvre*, and that glorified guide-book, *Rome*, with his other books of the past ten years, will be remembered by their titles only. Not all of the Rougon-Macquart series will stand the test of time. *L'Argent* and *Germinal* and *La Terre* will always find some readers among the discriminating, though not belonging to the imperishable literature of the world. Out of the whole mass of Zola's works, however, there loom up three colossal masterpieces, so wonderful, so overwhelming in the evidence of genius which they afford, and so impossible to forget, as to be assured of an unquestioned immortality. These three masterpieces are *L'Assommoir*, *Nana* and *La Débâcle*, and they are linked so closely in their purpose and in the development of one dominant idea, as to form a trilogy from which no member can be removed. They are the residuum—the enduring residuum—of the whole ambitious series of the Rougon-Macquart; and they, above and apart from any of their companion volumes, effect the purpose which Zola formed in 1869 of explaining through the medium of fiction the social life and the political decadence of the Second Empire. This is precisely what these three extraordinary books accomplish, and in writing them their author was inspired far more than perhaps he ever knew. For the three exhibit an unbroken sequence, and they work out with all the precision and the sureness of a scientific demonstration the thesis which was in the writer's mind. In *L'Assommoir* we have to do with individuals; in *Nana*, with society; in *La Débâcle*, with an entire nation. In *L'Assommoir* there are exhibited to us the vicious influences which beset the proletariat, the leaven of evil and uncleanness working amidst the haunts and hovels of the

degraded poor. In *Nana* the poison spreads and eats its way like a cancer into the homes of those who live in the great world. In *La Débâcle* we see a chivalrous and gallant nation infected with the foul disease, and smitten to the earth because of the rottenness that has eaten out its manhood and destroyed its strength.

L'Assommoir, as we have said, deals with individuals, the central figures being the *blanchisseuse,* Gervaise, and her husband, the tinsmith Coupeau. Gervaise is one of the most pathetic characters in fiction—and all the more so because she is drawn so simply and so naturally, and because there is not the slightest touch of the melodramatic in her story, no high lights such as Hugo loved, no false sentiment and no moralising. She is a figure stepping before us straight out of life itself. A womanly, affectionate, naturally gentle creature, she appears in the first chapters of the book as the cast-off mistress of a vulgar *maquereau,* one Lantier, whom she has sincerely loved, but who has suddenly deserted her and her children. In time she meets the tinsmith Coupeau, who marries her, and with whom she begins her life anew with every prospect of a good, hard-working, happy, uneventful, every-day existence. But Coupeau meets with an accident which disables him for a while and he acquires the habits of idleness and drink. He lives upon his wife; she also takes to drink; and there begins a gradual degradation which is detailed with patient minuteness through all its squalid, shameful, sickening stages until it ends in a dog's death for both: Gervaise a bedraggled street-walker, sodden, hopeless and void of any feeling, even of despair, and Coupeau a furious maniac, meeting his end with frantic yells of horror at the hideous fancies of his gin-crazed brain. Around these two poor wretches

the action of the story surges, panoramic in its multitudinous life, gigantic in its sweep and breadth and terrific in its concentrated vitriolic power. The whole stratum of that world to which Gervaise and Lantier and Coupeau belong is revealed so vividly and so unsparingly that there is nothing left to ask or tell. We know not merely the Coupeau *ménage*, but we know also a whole swarm of human beings, each one distinctly individualised, —artisans, petty shopkeepers, policemen, washerwomen, bullies, panders, drabs and drunkards—the whole population of the slums. There are some *genre* pictures in the book that are extraordinary in their stark veracity—the marriage of Gervaise at the *mairie*, and the wedding breakfast at the Moulin d'Argent; and later in the book the maudlin revel amid which Lantier, the former lover of Gervaise, once more appears as a bird of evil omen. Heartrending is the story of the poor, patient child, Lalie, whose drunken father, Bijard, flogs her to make her dance for him until she says quite gently and very simply: "Je ne puis pas, comprends-tu? Je vais mourir. . . . Sois gentil à cette heure, et dis-moi adieu, papa." And among the most awful of all episodes in fiction is the chapter where Gervaise, tempted by Lantier to renew her old relations with him, returns to her home to find her husband stretched across their chamber floor, helpless with drink and wallowing in his vomit, so that Gervaise, repelled and overcome by the sickening sight, yields to Lantier's entreaties and passes with him into the inner room, while her child, Nana, unobserved, peers through the dusky window with eyes illumined by a vicious curiosity.

In *L'Assommoir* is best studied the climax of Zola's so-called Naturalism, which has been defined as "an attempt to reach the beast in man . . . the beast which his [the

writer's] temperament leads him always to see and to see exclusively. A swarming, huddled mass of grovelling creatures, each hounded by his foul appetites of greed and lust." And Zola finds the beast unerringly; nor does he spare us one detail of its bestiality. His beasts growl in the language of their kind. Those words which one is startled to behold in print are all set down with an unflinching accuracy. The oaths, the blasphemies, the obscenities of the vilest of men and women, their strange, repulsive *argot,* half-unintelligible yet full of sinister significance, are reproduced for us, and show the knowledge gleaned in the unsavoury precincts of the *hôtel borgne.* For Zola has a purpose in his frankness. He desires us to see as in a sociological clinic the muck-heaps over which society has builded, that he may prepare us for a demonstration of the logical result.

Such a demonstration is given us in *Nana.* The purpose of this book is admirably described by an American critic, Mr. Hazeltine, as an attempt to show us how the crushed and mud-stained rabble inflicts upon the classes that are gorged with wealth and insolent with power a kind of hideous retribution. Nana is the daughter of Gervaise, born among the lowest haunts of Paris and nurtured in close proximity to the gutters. Depraved even as a child by association with other children prematurely initiated into every form of vice, she breathes of sensuality and exhales the very aroma of lasciviousness, so that men of every rank and station feel her strange, tormenting physical fascination. Yet she is not herself a devotee of passion for its own sake. She loves as the caprice of the moment moves her—now the inexperienced boy whom she corrupts, now the aristocratic courtier, and again and perhaps most of all, the goat-faced acrobat, Fontan, who

beats her and who lives upon her shameful earnings. But she is, first and foremost, wanton greed personified. To quote again:

> She is conceived as some fair ogress into whose yawning cave multitudes of men in hurried and endless procession descend and are engulfed. There is room for all ranks and grades of this social hierarchy. . . . It is merely indispensable that each shall bring an offering of some kind in his hand. He that cannot defray the charge of the establishment may pay the dressmaker; another shall furnish pin-money; another trinkets and bouquets. There is a certain breadth and grandeur in her insatiate greed and comprehensive harlotry; her net drags great and small; she seems to have infected a whole city. . . . She has grown like a rank weed amid the garbage of the Parisian pavement; she has the gorged luxuriance of a plant whose turgid leaves betray its compost bed. With the superb curves of her delicate flesh she avenges the beggars and outcasts who gave her birth. She becomes a malignant force of nature, a pestiferous yeast, tainting and disintegrating Paris, turning it sour like curdled milk. In one chapter she is compared to a gold-spangled horsefly, spawned from ordure, hovering above the carrion that lies rotting by the wayside, sending vermin from its putrescence, and poisoning the wayfarer whose cheek it brushes with its fetid wing. . . . At length the task of ruin and death is completed; wretchedness has spent its store of venom; Nana has exacted blood-money for her bruised and smarting kindred; the beggar and the outcast are avenged.

The whole book is a minute and startling study of the infection not only of Paris but of France; and its multiplicity of details and its extraordinary first-hand knowledge of the darker side of Parisian social life astonish and appal. For Nana is only one of a number of her kind who flit across the scene; and in the tainting influence which

they exercise, we feel instinctively the doom of an Empire in which a plague-spot such as this is festering and spreading. It is not alone the meretricious wantonness of Nana that we recognise; it is the presence in the background, of influences far more sinister than hers. The enigmatical episode of Mme. Laure and the implications in the story of the girl Satin are full of strangely baleful import when read between the lines. And, as the book proceeds, we see more and more that the menace of its meaning is more than a menace to mere individuals, and that the very vitals of a nation are growing putrid with disease and death. The last few pages indicate almost symbolically the doom that is impending over France; for while Nana lies dying, with her once seductive face transformed by smallpox into a repulsive mask, we hear outside the rabble, drunken with war's blood-madness, give utterance to that frantic cry of "A Berlin! A Berlin!"

La Débâcle shows the garnered fruits of what has gone before. A debased and brutalised proletariat, corrupting its masters with the noxious vices that rise from the social cesspools into the mansions of the great, has done its work, and now the moment comes when the ruin is revealed. France, challenged in her supremacy, has thrown down the gage of war, and the trumpets sound to battle. The helmeted hosts of Germany have crossed the Rhine; the trail of their huge columns desecrates French soil. The old martial ardour leaps again to life, the *Furor Gallicus* flames up once more, apparently as invincible as in the days of Jena and of Austerlitz. But alas! France is herself no longer. Her brain has been drugged by years of luxury; her energy is sapped by vice; she reels and totters to her fall. Here individuals no longer count; and Zola rises to an epic vastness of execution as he draws that

masterful picture of blended defiance and despair in the armies which go forth like misdirected mobs—their aimless marching and countermarching, their woeful lack of leadership, their pitiful privation in the midst of plenty, until at last their splendid courage becomes abject cowardice when they are paralysed by the terrible conviction that they have been betrayed. The vividness of all this portion of the story is indescribable. The reader is hurried on with breathless interest from scene to scene—the bloody struggle at Bazeilles, the horrors of Sedan, the glaring flames that mark the triumph of the mad Commune. And here and there we get a glimpse of the infinitely mournful figure of the Third Napoleon, dragged along at the tail of his army, unnoticed, helpless and despairing, as his haggard face, made still more ghastly by its rouge, peers forth above the golden bees that symbolise his fallen dynasty. For sustained and almost savage power, it is safe to say that no prose work of the nineteenth century can fully equal *La Débâcle.*

The two writers with whom Zola must inevitably be compared are Balzac and Victor Hugo,—Balzac because the whole conception of the Rougon-Macquart was suggested by the *Comédie Humaine;* and Hugo because he, too, like Zola, was dynamic in his method. The comparison with Balzac only leaves us with a heightened sense of that great master's sure supremacy. Not merely was his plan the vaster, but although his death left it unfinished in details, he really did complete it and at the moment of his death was still possessed of all his pristine power. There is no part of the *Comédie Humaine* that any lover of immortal genius can neglect or overlook; while Zola, working out a smaller plan, grew weary of his task, and wrote the last book of the series with a flagging, hesitating

pen. But with Hugo the comparison brings out into the clearest possible relief the immense superiority of Zola. For while Hugo is at times stupendous in the gigantic energy with which he works, he never ceases to impress us as theatrical. At the best he is less dramatic than melodramatic; and while we admire and are astonished, it is with the kind of admiration and astonishment that we give to a carefully prepared and gorgeous spectacle upon the stage. We marvel at the ingenuity of his effects; but even as we marvel we find ourselves considering them a miracle of stage management rather than a spontaneous creation of artistic genius. With him sublimity shades off into the grotesque, and his most tremendous imagery forever trembles upon the verge of the fantastic. He knew not when to stay his hand, and the unerring instinct which teaches the true artist where to pause was never his. He is sometimes magnificent, but he is oftener *bizarre*. The eternal vanity of Hugo, his self-consciousness, and his *pose* make almost everything he wrote ring false. But with Zola the case is otherwise. The great, unbending, pitiless sincerity of the man grips you as in a vise, and at his best he masters emotion, imagination and belief with a spell which it is impossible to break. Compare the greatest scenes in Hugo—that of the devil-fish in *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*, that of the life and death struggle in *Bug-Jargal*, that of the battle between man and cannon in *Quatre Vingt Treize*—with the most famous things in Zola, and the difference is the difference between the acted tragedy of the theatre and the crushing, poignant tragedies of human life.

Since Shakespeare's time no English writer, with the possible exception of Sir Walter Scott, has arisen fit to be compared with any one of these great Frenchmen for

sheer vitality and overwhelming power. How cold and pale our Anglo-Saxon fiction looks beside the splendid unrestraint of the masterpieces of French genius! Even Thackeray seems merely an amiable, mildly cynical, grandfatherly sort of person when we come to him straight from the reading of *Cousine Bette* or *L'Assommoir*, while Dickens shrinks to the proportions of a Cockney sentimentalist whose maudlin moments are varied with sporadic bursts of forced buffoonery. Whatever France has come to be among the political forces of the world, her sons still keep the flame of genius brilliantly aglow. And not the least among them was Emile Zola—in temperament an epic poet, in ambition a literary sociologist, in fact a Cyclopean panoramic artist. Of his own theories and of his own motives nothing new can now be said, nor does it matter what one thinks of them. His work speaks for itself; and literary annalists who know and understand that work must now record the fact that in his death a mighty elemental influence has passed away from earth.[1]

[1] From "The Bookman," November, 1902. Reprinted by permission of Dodd, Mead & Company.

LA TERRE

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

All that morning, Jean kept open the pocket of the blue canvas wallet he wore tied in front of him, with the left hand, whilst with the right he took out a handful of corn every three paces, and with a long sweeping gesture scattered it around. As his body swayed regularly to and fro, his heavy shoes sank into the rich soil and caught it up, while at every cast, through the flying white seeds, there gleamed the two red stripes of an uniform that he was wearing out. He walked steadfastly forward, looking big in his loneliness, while behind him a harrow to bury the grain trundled slowly along, drawn by two horses. A waggoner drove them with long, regular strokes of his whip, which he cracked over their ears.

This piece of land, in the locality known as Cornailles—it was of hardly more than an acre in extent—was of so little value that M. Hourdequin, the owner of La Borderie, had not cared to send the machine-sower, which was in use elsewhere. Jean, as he passed along the field from south to north, was directly facing the farm buildings about a mile and a half away. When he reached the end of the furrow, he raised his eyes, looked out without seeing anything, breathing himself for a moment.

A few low walls, a dark patch of old slates, lost on the threshold of La Beauce, whose plain stretched out interminably in the direction of Châtres. Beneath the dome of sky—the clouded sky of an October's close—ten leagues of cultivation displayed at this season a view of bare earth, ruddy and firm, great plots of tilth land, alternated with verdant patches of lucerne and clover;

and it was all without an elevation or a tree as far as the eye could reach, until it grew confused and shadowy against the line of the horizon, which was clean and round, as if it had been the sea. To the westward, one little wood alone fringed the sky with a russet border. In the centre, a road—that of Châteaudun to Orléans, stretched in a straight line, white as chalk for four leagues, pointing the geometrical preciseness of the telegraph poles. Nothing else visible, save three or four windmills on their timber pedestals, their arms motionless. Here and there hamlets formed little islets, or a distant steeple peeped from a declivity in the plain, where no church was visible in the smooth billows of this corn land.

But Jean turned on his heel and started again, from north to south, with the same swinging gait, holding the seed-lip in his left hand, his right threshing the air with a constant stream of seed. Now he was facing, and at no great distance, the narrow valley of the Aigre, which cut the plain like a ditch; beyond that La Beauce began again, stretched away in its vastness to Orléans.

It was only possible to guess where fields and woodlands occurred, from the line of tall poplars whose yellowing crests overtopped the hollow, and looked at that level like mere shrubs. Of the little village of Rognes, built upon the slope, only a few roofs were visible, beneath the church which reared on high its gray-stoned steeple, the abode of families of ancient rooks. To the east, above the valley of the Loire, where, six miles beyond, Cloyes, the principal town of the department was buried, the distant hills of Le Perche were suggested—leaden coloured in the sombre light. That was of old Dunois, though now it had become a district of Châteaudun, between Le Perche and La Beauce—the border-land of the latter, at the spot where for the unfruitful character of its soil it has become known as Lousy Beauce.

When Jean had reached the end of the field he stopped once more, cast a glance below, along the stream of the Aigre that gleamed so through the grass, following the road to Cloyes,

which upon this Saturday was dotted with the carts of peasants going to market. Then he retraced his steps. And always at the same pace, with the same gesture he tramped towards the north or turned south again, enveloped in a dust-cloud of his sowing: and still behind him the harrow, to the accompaniment of the cracking whip, prodded down the seed with the same even, and one might say considered, movement. Prolonged rainfall had delayed the autumn sowing; they had still been putting in manure in August, and the fields had been for some time ready, bereft of hindering weeds, ripe for the return of wheat in its rotation, after the clover and the oats. Their fear of approaching frost, moreover, which seemed imminent after the floods, was urging on the farmers. The cold weather had set in suddenly, and the sky was soot-coloured, disturbed by no breath of wind, casting a light at once monotonous and melancholy over this ocean of immovable land. On all sides they were sowing; to the left of Jean there was another sower, to the right, three hundred yards further, a third, and others and more still were blurs in the distance, in the fleeting perspective of those flat pastures. Little black silhouettes, outlines growing finer and more diminutive until they faded away altogether. But all alike used that gesture, distributing their seed, which was vaguely suggested, as it might have been a flood of life, around them. The plain seemed to shiver with it, even in the indistinguishable distance where the scattered sowers were no longer visible.

For the last time Jean was descending, when he perceived, coming from the direction of Rognes, a large, mottled cow, which a young girl—she was a child almost—was leading by a rope. The little peasant girl and her animal followed the path which ran the length of the valley, bordering the plain, and Jean, turning his back on her, was about to complete his task, plodding up again, when a noise of running, some stifled cries, caused him again to raise his head as he undid his seed-lip preparatory to departure. It was the cow which had bolted, and she galloped through a field of lucerne, followed by the girl, who vainly

sought to hold her. He was afraid of an accident. "Let her be!" he cried out. The girl took no heed of him, but panted out abuse of the animal in a voice in which anger and fear were mingled.

"Stop—stop—La Coliche! . . . Ah, wicked beast! . . . Stop, you ugly brute!" So far, running and leaping with the utmost energy of her little legs, she had kept up with her. But at last she tripped, fell, and recovered herself only to fall again a few yards further, and thence she was dragged along by the excited beast. And now she shrieked, and her body made a trail through the clover.

"Good God! can't you let her go?" Jean went on shouting. . . . "Let her go, then." And he shouted so, mechanically, in his panic until he also started running, for he began to understand. The rope must have become twisted round her wrist, and each fresh effort jammed it tighter. Happily, he intercepted them across a ploughed field, and he reached the cow at such a headlong speed that the animal, frightened and stupefied, stopped short. In a moment he was unwinding the rope, had seated the girl on the grass. "Nothing broken?"

But she had not even fainted. She sat up, touched herself, pulled up her petticoats as far as her thighs without embarrassment to examine her grazed knees. She was still so breathless that she could hardly speak.

"You see—that's where it hurts. . . . All the same, I can move about—it's nothing. . . . Oh, I was frightened. On the road I felt like pulp."

And she looked at her bruised wrist, with the red scar circling it, moistened it with saliva, applied her lips to it. Then she added with a great sigh of relief, of assuagement:

"You know she's not vicious—La Coliche. But ever since this morning she's been in her tantrums. It's because she's in heat. . . . I am taking her to the bull at La Borderie."

"At La Borderie," repeated Jean. "That'll do nicely. I'm going back there, I will come with you."

He addressed her in the familiar second person, treating her as a little girl—she was so slight still in spite of her fourteen years.

With her chin in the air she watched him, with a serious face—this big, red-haired fellow, with his cropped hair, his broad, regular features. His nine-and-twenty years made him seem an old man to her.

"Oh, I know you—you're 'Corporal,' the joiner who stayed on as man to M. Hourdequin."

The young man smiled at this nickname, which the peasants had fastened on him; and he considered her in his turn, surprised to find her almost a woman already, with her little, firm figure fairly formed, her long face, her eyes, black and very deep, her full lips, her nose and white flesh like a fruit that is beginning to ripen. She wore a gray petticoat, and a black woollen bodice, a round cap formed her head-dress; and her skin was very dark, tanned and bronzed by the sunshine.

"And aren't you old Mouche's youngest?" he asked. "I hadn't recognized you. . . . Aren't you? Your sister was Buteau's girl last spring, when he worked with me at La Borderie?"

She answered simply:

"Yes, I am Françoise. . . . It was my sister, Lise, who went with Buteau—our cousin—and she is six months gone with child by him. . . . He has run off—over Orgères way, to the Chamade farm."

"That's it," Jean concluded. "I have seen them together."

And they stood for an instant in silence, face to face: he laughing, as he remembered how one evening he had surprised the two lovers behind a rick; she continuing to moisten her bruised wrist, as though her wet lips soothed its irritation, while in a field hard by the cow was grazing the clover heads with calm satisfaction. The waggoner and the harrow had gone away, had made a détour to join the road. The chatter of two rooks could be heard as they eddied in a continual flight round the

steeple. The three strokes of the Angelus reverberated in the sullen air.

"What! noon already," cried Jean. "We must hurry ourselves."

Then, noticing La Coliche in the meadow:

"Your cow's eating up the country. Suppose anyone saw her! . . . You wait, my beauty, I'll treat you."

"No, let her be," said Françoise, stopping him. "It belongs to us, that plot. Yes, my lady, it was on your own ground you tumbled me. . . . All that side is in the family, as far as Rognes. The rest of us, we have it from here to over yonder; that side is my uncle Fouan's; further on is my aunt's, La Grande."

And while she pointed out the allotments with her finger, she had led the cow back again into the pathway. It was only then, when she had hold of the animal once more, that she thought of thanking the young man.

"All the same, it was a rare good turn you did me. Thanks, you know, thanks with all my heart."

They started off again, following the narrow road which ran along the valley, until it was obliterated in the fields. The last notes of the Angelus had faded away; only the rooks were still incessantly cawing. Following the cow, which dragged at the rope in front of them, neither of them spoke further: they had fallen back upon that silence of peasants, who will walk for leagues, side by side, and never exchange a word. They cast a glance to their right, at a machine-sower of which the horses had just turned round, hard by them. The waggoner cried them a "good-day," and they answered "good-day" in the same grave tone. Lower down to their left, all along the road to Cloyes, the procession of carts continued, the market not being open until one o'clock. They rattled roughly on their two wheels like grasshoppers, so foreshadowed in the distance that the one white point in the women's caps was all that could be distinguished. "There's my uncle Fouan, and Aunt Rose, yonder—on their way to the

lawyer," said Françoise, her eyes on a carriage that looked the size of a walnut shell, as it wheeled along, a mile and a half away. She had the sailor's eye, that long vision of inhabitants of the plain, nicely observant of little things, which can recognize a man or an animal by the little moving blot made by its outline.

"Yes, I heard of that," Jean answered. "So it's decided then: the old man divides his property between his daughter and his two sons?"

"It's decided: they are all going to meet to-day at Monsieur Baillehache's."

Her eyes continued to follow the vehicle.

"Our lot, we snap our fingers at it, you know. We shan't be any fatter for it, nor leaner . . . Only, there is Buteau. My sister thinks he will marry her perhaps, when he gets his share."

Jean gave vent to a laugh.

"That damned old Buteau! we were mates. No, it don't cost him much telling lies to the girls. He must have them anyhow—he'll get them by main force, if they won't come for kindness."

"Oh, I grant you, he's a pig," Françoise declared with an air of conviction. "It's a dirty trick to go and leave your cousin like that—in the family way.

Then brusquely, in a fit of anger:

"Hold up, La Coliche! I'll make you waltz. Look at her beginning again—she gets quite mad, the brute, when she's like this."

She brought back the cow with a violent tug. Just there the road ceased to follow the line of the plain. The trap had passed out of sight, and the two continued their walk, with no other view, to right or left of them, than the endless expanse of tilth land. Between the ploughed fields and the pasture lands the path crept along, with no relief of bushes, leading to the farm, which seemed near enough for their hand to touch it, and which yet retreated beneath the ashen-grey sky. And they had

fallen back into their silence, and opened their mouths no more, as though they were seized by the reflected gravity of this Beauce—so gloomy and so fertile.

When they had arrived, the great paved court-yard of La Borderie, shut in on three sides by its stables, its barns, its sheep-folds, was quite deserted. But suddenly in the kitchen doorway a young woman showed herself, small and pretty, with an impudent face.

"Well, now, Jean, don't you want to feed this morning?"

"I'm coming, Madame Jacqueline."

Ever since Cognet's daughter—he had been a labourer at Rognes—La Cognette as they called her when she used to wash up at the farm at the age of twelve—ever since she had united the honours of mistress with the duties of maid, she made people treat her as a lady, gave herself airs of despotism.

"Ah, it's you, Françoise," she went on. "You've come for the bull. Well, you must wait. The herdsman is at Cloyes with Monsieur Hourdequin. But he is coming back; he ought to be here."

And as Jean was about to enter the kitchen, she caught hold of him, pressed up against him with a laughing air, careless of observation. She was a *gourmande* in her love affairs, and did not content herself with the master.

Françoise, left to herself, waited patiently; she had seated herself on a stone bench in front of the manure-heap, which occupied a third of the court-yard. Vacantly she was watching a troop of fowls, who went picking here and there and warming themselves on the broad, low manure bed, which was steaming in the cold air, emitting a faint blue smoke. At the end of half an hour, when Jean reappeared finishing a slice of bread and butter, she had not stirred. He sat down at her side, and as the cow was restless, tossing her tail about and lowing, he remarked:

"It's a nuisance that the herdsman is so long."

The young girl shrugged her shoulders. Nothing hurried her.

Then, after a fresh silence:

"So your name is Jean, just short, 'Corporal?'"

"No; Jean Macquart."

"And you don't belong to this neighbourhood?"

"No, I am a Provençal, from Plassans, a town down south."

She lifted her eyes, examining him, surprised that anyone should have come from so far.

"After Solferino," he went on, "eighteen months ago, I came back from Italy on furlough, and a comrade brought me here. . . . Then my old trade of joiner was no more good to me, and one thing or another led me to stay on at the farm."

"Yes," she said, quite simply, without taking her great black eyes off him.

But at that moment La Coliche set up a prolonged roar of impatient desire, and a hollow greeting came from the shut gates of the cow-shed.

"Do you hear?" cried Jean. "That beggar, Cæsar, has heard her. . . . Listen, he's grumbling inside. . . . oh, he knows his business, you can't bring a cow into the yard, without his scenting her, and knowing what's wanted of him. . . ."

Then interrupting himself:

"Look here, the herdsman must have stayed with Monsieur Hourdequin. If you like I will fetch you the bull. We could manage it between us."

"Yes, it's a good idea," said Françoise, rising.

He opened the door of the cow-shed—then stopped to ask her:

"And your brute, must we tie her up?"

"Tie her? no, no, it's not worth the trouble. She is quite ready, she won't even move."

When the door was opened, they could see, in two lines, on each side of the central alley, the thirty cows of the farm—some lying on the fodder, others munching the mangel-wurzels in their manger; while from his stall one of the bulls, a black Dutch beast with white marks, pushed out his head, full of the expectancy of his task. As soon as he was let loose, Cæsar came

out slowly. Suddenly he stopped, as if he were surprised by the fresh air, the full day; and he stood for a minute motionless, with stiffened feet, brandishing his tail nervously, his neck swollen, his muzzle extended and sniffing. La Coliche, without stirring turned her large, staring eyes towards him, while she lowed softly. Then he advanced, pushed against her, laid his head on her crupper with a short, rough pressure—his tongue was protruded, and he pushed her tail aside, licking her legs. And all the time she permitted him, without budging an inch, only a slight tremor ran up the length of her hide.

Jean and Françoise, with their hands hanging down, gravely waited. And when he was ready the bull mounted on La Coliche with a quick leap, a ponderous effort that made the ground tremble. She had not budged, and he pressed against her flanks with his two legs. But the cow was a Corentine of considerable height, and was so tall and big for the bull, who was of a less stalwart race, that he could not reach her. He recognized it, tried to mount again, but failed.

" He's such a little one," said Françoise.

" Yes, he's a little one. No matter, he'll get in somehow."

She shook her head, and as the bull was still feeling his way, exhausting himself, she said with decision:

" No, he must be helped. If he doesn't get in properly it will be wasted—she won't keep it."

With eyes calm and attentive, as though she found the need a serious one, she made a step forward. The care which exercised her darkened the black of her eyes; her red lips were half parted, her face was impassive. She lifted her arm with a free gesture, caught the bull's member in her hand and pulled it up. And the animal, feeling himself on the verge, his strength re-invigorated, needed but a single effort to penetrate her loins deeply. Then he withdrew himself. It was accomplished: the stroke of a dibble driving home the seed! Solidly, substantially, with the immovable fecundity of the soil in which men sow, the cow had received, without a movement, her male's fertilizing spray. She

had not even trembled beneath the weight. And the bull had already tumbled back, giving the earth a fresh shock.

Françoise had withdrawn her hand, but she held her arm aloft, expectantly: now she dropped it, saying:

" That's all right."

" Famous," replied Jean, with an air of conviction, contented like the good workman he was at a job done quietly and well. He did not care to launch any loose pleasantry at her, of a kind with which the farm lads often made the girls giggle when they brought their cows there. The child seemed to take it as so simple and needful that honestly there was no cause for laughter. It was nature. But for the last minute Jacqueline had been present again in the doorway; and with a cooing in her voice which he knew so well, she cried gaily:

" So you must have your hand in it. I expect your sweetheart hasn't got a fancy for that job."

Jean had burst out with a loud laugh, and Françoise grew suddenly scarlet. In her confusion and to hide her embarrassment, while the bull went back of his own accord to the stable, and La Coliche munched at a few oats which had sprouted up by the manure-heap, she fumbled in her pockets, brought out her handkerchief and untied a corner where she had put the forty sous for the service.

" There you are, your money," she said. " And good evening to you."

She departed with her cow, and Jean, taking up his seed-lip followed her, telling Jacqueline that he was going to the Poteau field, as M. Hourdequin had ordered him that day.

" Good," she said, " the harrow must be there now."

Then as the young man caught up with the little peasant girl and they disappeared in single file down the narrow path, she called out to them in her rich mocking voice:

" There's no danger, you know. If you do get lost together, the little one knows the way well."

At their rear the farm-yard again grew deserted. This time

neither of them had laughed. They walked slowly; and there was no noise save that their shoes made grinding against the stones. He could see nothing of her but her childish neck which a few black hairs darkened. At last, after they had gone fifty yards:

"She makes a mistake to tease other people about men," said Françoise, deliberately. "I might have answered her back. . . ."

She turned towards the young man, regarding him with a malicious air:

"It's true, ain't it? She makes M. Hourdequin behave as if she were his wife already. Perhaps you know something about it?"

He seemed uneasy, assumed a stupid expression:

"Lord! she does what she likes; it's her own look-out."

Françoise, with her back turned to him, had resumed her walk.

"That's true enough. I can joke with you because you are old enough to be my father, and it doesn't matter. But look here, ever since Buteau served my sister that dirty trick, I've sworn I'd cut myself in pieces sooner than have a sweetheart."

Jean shook his head, and they said no more.

The little field of Poteau was reached at the end of the path, half-way to Rognes. There the young man halted. The harrow was in waiting; a bag of grain had been emptied into a furrow. He filled his seed-lip from it, saying:

"Good-bye, then."

"Good-bye," replied Françoise, "and once more, thank you."

But he was struck by a sudden fear, ran after her, crying:

"I say, suppose La Coliche began again. Would you like me to go as far as home with you?"

She was already some distance, but she turned round, and her voice came to him, placid and strong across the immense silence of the country.

"No, no, it would be useless, there's no more risk, she is as full as she wants to be."

Jean, with his seed-lip bound in front of him, had begun to

move down the ploughed field, with his monotonous gesture which distributed the seed; and he raised his eyes, and saw Françoise growing smaller as she passed along the ground, a tiny figure behind her cow, which rolled its huge sides lazily. When he retraced his steps, he ceased to see her, but on the return journey he found her again, still more diminished, so small now that she looked like a dandelion clock, with her slim figure and her white cap. Thrice in this fashion he watched her dwindling. Then he looked for her, but she was gone, had turned down, no doubt, in front of the church.

Two o'clock struck, the sky was still gray, thick and frosty; it was as though the sun had been buried in shovelfuls of fine ashes for long months, until the spring should come. In the universal gloom, one brighter spot lightened the clouds in the direction of Orléans, suggesting that somewhere or other in that quarter, leagues away, the sun was shining. And it was against this pallid shield that the steeple of Rognes was relieved, where the village languished, hidden in the invisible hollow made by the valley of the Aigre. Towards Châtres, to the north, the low line of the horizon kept its conciseness of outline,—an inky definition between the dull uniformity of the vast skies and the limitless expanse of La Beauce. Since the dinner hour the number of sowers seemed to be increased. Now there was one for each allotment, on each small holding; they multiplied, swarmed like laborious black ants sent abroad for some mighty labour, eagerly pursuing their disproportioned task; it seemed titanic in view of their insignificance, and the same gesture was noticeable invariably, even with the most distant, an obstinacy of insects, at war with the vastness of the soil, victorious to the end of their endeavour and of their life.

Jean sowed till night-fall. After the Poteau field came that of Rigoles, and then the field of Four-Roads. He came and went with long rhythmical strides over the ploughed ground; and the grain in his seed-lip dwindled, and the seed behind him fertilized the earth.

CHAPTER II

The house of Maître Baillehache, notary at Cloyes, was situated in the Rue Grouaise, on the left, on the way to Châteaudun: a little one-storied, white house, to the corner of which was fixed the solitary lamp which lit up the broad, paved street that was deserted all the week, but was animated on Saturday by the peasants flocking in to market. From quite a distance one could discern the notary's two escutcheons gleaming on the chalky line of low buildings; behind there was a strip of garden which ran down to the Loire. Upon that Saturday, in the room to the right of the hall, which served as an office and looked out on the street, the office-boy, a lad of fifteen, stunted and pale, had pushed aside the muslin blinds to see the people pass. The two other clerks—one old, corpulent, and dirty-looking, the other, younger, with an emaciated appearance and a bilious face, were writing at a double desk of discoloured deal, which was all the furniture the room boasted, with the exception of seven or eight chairs and a cast-iron stove, which was never lit, however, till December, even though it might have snowed on All-Saints' Day. The pigeon-holes which adorned the walls, the green portfolios cracked at the corners, bulging out with yellow documents, infected the room with a smell of stale ink and of old papers eaten up with dust. And all the time two peasants, sitting side by side, a man and a woman, were waiting with an imperturbable patience that was full of respect. Such a mass of papers, and, above all, the gentlemen writing so fast, their pens all scratching at once, rendered them serious, suggested ideas to them of money and litigation.

The woman—a woman of thirty-four—was very dark, and her pleasant face was only spoilt by her large nose. She had folded her hard, workaday hands on her black stuff apron that

was trimmed with velvet; and with her alert eyes, which explored every corner, she was plainly dreaming of all the title-deeds which lurked there. The man, however, her elder by five years, fair and placid-looking, in black trousers and a long blue linen blouse, brand new, held his round felt hat upon his knees, and no shadow of a thought animated his broad face—the colour of terra-cotta, close-shaven, pierced with two big, pale-blue eyes, as impassive as those of some ruminating cow.

But a door was opened, and Maître Baillehache, who had just lunched with his brother-in-law, Hourdequin, the farmer, entered, looking flushed—young enough still for all his fifty-five years, with his thick lips, his worn eyelids, whose wrinkles gave his look the aspect of a continued laugh. He wore glasses and had a constant nervous habit of pulling at the long gray hairs of his whiskers.

"Ah, it's you, Delhomme," he said. "Fouan senior has made up his mind, then, to the distribution?"

It was the woman who replied.

"Yes, Monsieur Baillehache. . . . We are all to meet here, to come to an agreement, and to hear how it's to be done."

"All right, Fanny, we shall see. It is barely one o'clock, we must wait for the others."

And the notary talked on for a little; he asked the price of corn, which had been very low for the last two months; and showed Delhomme all the friendly respect which was due to a farmer who owned forty acres, three cows, and kept a man. Then he went back into his office. The clerks had not raised their heads, but the scratching of their pens had been accentuated; and once more the Delhommes settled down to wait impassively. She was a lucky one, this Fanny, to have been married to a lover who was both honest and wealthy, when she was not even with child by him, and had no expectations from her father, Fouan, beyond about seven acres. Her husband, on his side, had never regretted it, for where could he have found a housekeeper more active or intelligent? She was so much this that he allowed

her to guide him in all things, his own mind being limited, but so just and so impartial, withal, that at Rognes he was often selected to arbitrate. At this moment the office-boy, who was looking out at the street, stifled a laugh between his fingers. He whispered to his neighbour, the old, corpulent, dirty-looking clerk:

"Here's 'Jesus Christ'!"

Fanny, with a quick movement, bent over towards the ear of her husband.

"Look here, let me manage it. I'm very fond of father and mother, but I won't let them rob us; and let's be on our guard against Buteau and that vermin, Hyacinthe."

She alluded to her two brothers, the eldest of whom she had seen coming past the window—Hyacinthe, known to the whole country side by the name of "Jesus Christ"—an idler and a drunkard, who, when he had left the army, after having seen service in Africa, had taken to tramp the fields, refusing to do any regular work, but living by theft and poaching, as though he were still looting a trembling nation of Bedouins. A big, lusty fellow entered, in all the muscular vigour of his forty years, with curly hair and a pointed beard, long and matted, and the face of a ruined Christ—a Christ who was a drunkard, and had violated women, and robbed on the high road. He had been at Cloyes since the morning, and was drunk already, his trousers muddy, his blouse filthily stained, and a tattered cap stuck on the back of his head; and he was smoking a halfpenny cigar, which stank. And, withal, there looked out of his fine, sunken eyes a merriment that was not evil, the open heart of good-humoured drunkenness.

"Father and mother not here, then, yet?" he asked.

And when the thin clerk, yellow with biliousness, answered him impatiently with a negative motion of his head, he stood for a moment looking at the walls, his cigar still smoking in his hand. He had not cast a glance at his sister or his brother-in-law, who for their part had not appeared to notice his entry. Then,

without adding a word, he walked out; he was going to wait on the pavement.

" Oh, Jesus Christ! Oh, Jesus Christ! " repeated the office-boy in a falsetto, his nose in the street, with more and more amusement at the nickname, which reminded him of queer stories.

But hardly five minutes had elapsed when the Fouans arrived at last—two old people with slow and cautious movements. The father, who had been once very vigorous, and was now seventy, had been dried up and withered by labour so arduous, and by a passion for his land so vehement, that his body was bent double, as though it would return to that land, which he had coveted and enjoyed with such violence. Yet, his legs apart, he was robust still and well preserved. His little white whiskers were neat as hare's feet, and the long family nose sharpened his thin face, of which the parchment-like texture was ploughed by huge furrows. In the shadow, never an inch away from him, was the mother, smaller, seeming not to have lost her plumpness, big-bellied, indeed, with incipient dropsy. Her face was the colour of oats, pierced with round eyes, a round mouth, which was as tightly compressed, with the multitude of wrinkles, as a miser's purse. Stupid, and compelled at ' ome to take the part of a docile and hard-working animal, she had always trembled before the despotic authority of her husband.

" Ah, so it's you at last! " cried Fanny, rising to her feet.

Delhomme had at the same time quitted his seat, and from behind the old folks Jesus Christ had just re-appeared without a word, lurching as he walked. He knocked the end of his cigar to extinguish it, then stowed away the evil-smelling stump in a pocket of his blouse.

" Well, we are here," said Fouan. " We only want Buteau. . . . Never punctual, never like the others, that bugger isn't! "

" I saw him at market," said Jesus Christ in a voice roughened by brandy. " He'll come." Buteau, the youngest, aged seven-and-twenty, owed his nickname to his stubborn wits, which were

always in mutiny, obstinately centred in ideas of his own, which were shared by no one else. Even as a boy he had never been able to get on with his parents; and later, having drawn a lucky number in the conscription, he had run away from them, and hired out his labour first at La Borderie and then at La Chamade. But while his father still went on grumbling he came in, merry and alert. In his case that large nose of the Fouans was less developed, while in the lower portion of his face the jaw-bone was immensely prominent, the jaws powerful like those of a savage. His forehead retreated, all the top of his head was flat, and behind his boisterous laugh there lurked already something cunning and ferocious. He derived from his father the brutality of his desires, his absorbing greed for possession; and this was aggravated by the narrow avarice which he had from his mother. In every quarrel, when the two old people heaped him with reproaches, he replied to them:

"You shouldn't have made me like it."

"Look here, it's fifteen miles from La Chamade to Cloyes," he said now, in answer to their complaints, "And besides—I'm here as soon as you are. . . . Are you going to drop on me any more?"

And the quarrel became general, and they all talked at the top of their shrill and piercing voices—used to speech in wind and weather—discussing their business exactly as though they were at home. The clerks, whom the noise inconvenienced, looked askance at them, until the lawyer was attracted by it, and once more opened the door of his private office.

"Are you all there? Come in, then!"

The room looked upon the garden, upon the little strip of land which ran down to the Loire, by the banks of which could be discerned in the distance the leafless poplars. A clock of black marble set off the mantel-piece, standing between portfolios of papers; there was nothing else but a mahogany writing-table, a map-case and some chairs. M. Baillehache had immediately taken his place at his desk as if it were a seat of judgment, whilst

the peasants, entering in single file, hesitated, looked sheepishly at the chairs, embarrassed as to where and how they should bestow themselves.

"Come, be seated!"

Thereupon Fouan and Rose, pushed on by the others, took the front places on two chairs; Fanny and Delhomme, side by side, also settled themselves behind them, while Buteau was by himself in a corner against the wall. Hyacinthe alone remained standing by the window, blocking out the daylight with his huge shoulders. But the lawyer, with signs of impatience, called to him familiarly:

"Now, Jesus Christ, be seated."

He had to take the initiative in the business before them.

"So, Master Fouan, you have resolved to divide your property and your means of livelihood between your two sons and your daughter?"

The old man made no answer, the others remained impassive, a long silence occurred. The lawyer, however, accustomed to their slowness, was in no more hurry than they were. His profession here was an inheritance of two hundred and fifty years: the Baillehaches from father to son had succeeded each other at Cloyes—themselves sprung from an old family of La Beauce—and they had become infected with the ruminating heaviness of their peasant clients—a moody circumspection which swamps the least discussion in lengthy intervals of silence and floods of useless words. He opened a penknife, began to pare his nails.

"Isn't that so? I suppose you have come to a decision?" he repeated at last, his eyes fixed on the old man.

The latter turned round and cast a look upon all of them before he said, groping for his words:

"Yes, it's very likely, Monsieur Baillehache. . . . I spoke about it to you last harvest, and you told me to think over it some more; and I've thought about it again, and anyhow I think it must come to that."

He explained his reasons in interrupted sentences, broken by

continual digressions. What he did not explain, which was yet suggested by the suppressed emotion in his voice, was his infinite bitterness, his dark rancour, the physical pangs which tore him, at the notion of dispossessing himself of the property he had coveted so hotly before his father's death, and later had cultivated with the absorbing frenzy of an animal in heat, and had added to, strip by strip, at the price of the most sordid avarice. Such and such a portion represented months of bread and cheese, whole winters without a fire, with no other support than some mouthfuls of water. He had loved his land, as one loves a woman whom one kills and for whom one murders. To him were neither wife nor children, no one, nothing, that was human —only his land.

And here he was, grown old, compelled to hand over his mistress to his sons, as of old his father had done to him, and he was furious with his own impotence.

"You see, Monsieur Baillehache, one must look at the right of a thing—my legs are done for, my arms are not much better and, curse me! the land suffers for it. . . . It might have gone on if we could have arranged with the children. . . ."

He threw a glance upon Buteau and Jesus Christ, who did not stir, their eyes looking out vaguely, as though they were a hundred miles from hearing him.

"And so! Do you want me to take on people, strangers who will rob us? No, labourers cost too much, they eat up the profits day by day. And for me, I can do no more! Look here, this season out of nineteen *setiers*, that belong to me, well, I've hardly had strength to cultivate a quarter of them, just enough to live on, corn for ourselves and grass for the two cows. Then it breaks my heart to see all that good land spoiling. Yes, I'd sooner give it all up than have a hand in such a crime."

There was a lump in his throat, and he made a great gesture of sorrow and of resignation. Beside him, his wife, crushed beneath more than half a century of obedience and labour, was listening.

" The other day," he went on, " when she was making cheese, Rose fell with her face into it. And me—it makes me sick to do nothing but drive into market. . . . And then I can't take away my land with me when I go. I must give it up, must give it up. Besides, we've worked enough, we should like to die in peace. Isn't that so, Rose? "

" As sure as God sees us it is," said the old woman.

A fresh silence fell upon them, a long silence. The lawyer finished paring his nails. At last he laid the penknife upon his desk, saying:

" Yes, these are very good reasons; it is often necessary to make up one's mind to a deed-of-gift. I ought to add that it saves a family expense, for the death duties are much heavier than those for making over one's property in one's lifetime."

Buteau, for all his affected indifference, could not suppress a cry.

" What, is that true, Monsieur Baillehache? "

" Certainly. You will save some hundreds of francs by it."

The others grew interested, even Delhomme's face was lit up, whilst father and mother alike shared the general satisfaction. It was understood the affair was settled from the moment that it cost less.

" It remains for me to make the usual observations," added the lawyer. " Many wise heads disapprove of a man making over his estate; they look upon it as immoral, accuse it of breaking the ties of family. Indeed I could quote some deplorable instances; the children sometimes behave abominably when parents have abdicated in their favour."

The two sons and the daughter listened open-mouthed, blinking their eyes a little, with a tremulous movement of their cheeks.

" Let father keep everything if he has those ideas," said Fanny, stiffly, wounded in her sensitiveness.

" We have always done our duty," said Buteau.

" And it isn't work we're afraid of," declared Jesus Christ.

M. Baillehache calmed them with a gesture.

"Allow me to finish. I know you are good children, honest working folk, and with you there will certainly be no danger of your parents some day repenting."

He put no irony into the statement, as he repeated the amicable remark that twenty-five years of professional custom brought so glibly to his lips. But the mother, little as she had seemed to understand, let her worn eyes wander from her daughter to her two sons. All three she had reared without any tenderness, turning to them the coldness of a housekeeper who blames the young ones for eating too much, diminishing her hoards. She had a grudge against the younger, because he had run away just when he was beginning to earn money; with her daughter she had never been able to agree, annoyed to find herself in collusion with a temper like her own, an active, robust nature, in which the father's intelligence had turned to pride; and her gaze only softened when it rested upon her eldest-born, the scamp who resembled neither herself nor her husband, a weed that had grown up no one knew how, and whom, perhaps, for that very reason she excused and preferred.

Fouan also had glanced at his children, first at one and then at the other, with a dull apprehension of what they might do with his property. The drunkard's sloth hurt him less than the eager covetousness of the two others. Then he shook his tremulous head: what was the good of tormenting one's self, since the thing had to be?

"And now that the distribution is decided on," said the lawyer, "we have to settle the terms. Are you agreed upon the requisite interest?"

In a moment they were all impassive and dumb. Their tanned faces had assumed rigid expressions, the impenetrable gravity of diplomatists treating of the price of an empire. Then they glanced furtively at each other, but no one spoke. It was once more the father who explained things.

"No, Monsieur Baillehache, we haven't talked that over; we waited until we should be all together—here. But it's simple

enough, isn't it? I've nineteen acres—or, nine and a half hectares, as they say nowadays. Now if I let them, it would come to nine hundred francs, at a hundred francs the hectare."

Buteau, who was the least patient, leapt off his chair.

"What! a hundred francs the hectare; you're kidding us, father."

And a preliminary discussion raged round these figures. Certainly there was an acre of vineyard; yes, that could be let for fifty francs. But where could anyone be found to pay such a price for the twelve acres of arable, and above all for the six acres of pasture land, those fields on the bank of the Aigre, where what hay you raised was worthless? The arable lands themselves were not particularly valuable, more especially that portion of them which ran along the plain, for the soil that could be cultivated grew thinner the closer it lay to the valley.

"Look here, father," said Fanny, with a reproachful air, "it won't do to make game of us."

"It's worth a hundred francs the hectare," the old man repeated, obstinately; and he gave sundry slaps to his thighs. "I can let it to-morrow at a hundred francs, if I like. . . . And pray what do you think it's worth? Just tell me what you think it's worth? "

"It's worth sixty francs," said Buteau.

Fouan, beside himself, stuck to his figure, embarked upon an extravagant eulogy of his land—land so excellent that it raised wheat of its own accord—when Delhomme, silent until now, declared with his tone of frank honesty:

"It's worth eighty francs, not a sou more nor less."

Immediately the old man grew calm again.

"Good! call it eighty; I'm ready to make a sacrifice for my children."

But Rose, who had caught hold of an end of his blouse, came out with one word only. "No, no," she cried, her meanness up in arms at once. Jesus Christ had remained aloof from them. The land was no longer dear to him since his five years in Africa.

He was filled with only one desire—to have his share and raise money on it. So he remained lounging back with an air of bantering superiority.

"I've said eighty," cried Fouan, "and I mean eighty. I was always one to stick to my word, so help me, I was. . . . Nine hectares and a half; come now, that makes seven hundred and sixty francs—in round numbers, eight hundred. Well, my annuity will be eight hundred francs; that's fair."

Buteau broke out into violent laughter, whilst Fanny protested by shaking her head, as though astounded. And M. Baillehache, who, since the discussion began, had been looking out into the garden with wandering eyes, came back to his clients, seemed to listen to them; and he pulled his whiskers with his accustomed queer gesture, and felt drowsy after digestion of the excellent lunch he had made.

This time, however, the old man was right; it was a fair proposal. But the children, heated, carried away by their passion for making a bargain on the lowest terms obtainable, grew frantic; they haggled and swore, and displayed the low cunning of peasants buying a pig.

"Eight hundred francs," sneered Buteau; "do you mean to live like gentlefolks? Eight hundred francs, when you would spend four hundred! Say at once you want to kill yourselves with indigestion."

Fouan kept his temper still; he found their haggling quite natural, and simply set himself against their anticipated violence, himself excited also, while he went on to the full extent of his demands.

"Stay a moment, that isn't all. Understand, we keep the house and garden for our lifetime. Then, as we shall raise no more crops, nor keep the two cows, we must have a barrel of wine every year, our firewood, and every week two and a half gallons of milk, a dozen eggs, and three cheeses."

"Oh, father!" wailed Fanny piteously, despairingly, "oh, father!"

Buteau would discuss it no longer. He had leapt up hastily, walked about with abrupt movements; he had even resumed his cap preparatory to departure. Jesus Christ had also quitted his chair, fearful that all this fuss would result in an abandonment of the distribution. Delhomme, alone, remained unmoved, with one finger laid against his nose, in an attitude of profound meditation and some weariness. Monsieur Baillehache felt the necessity of hastening matters a little. He shook off his lethargy, and stroked his whiskers more vigorously.

"You know, my good people, that wine and firewood as well as cheese and eggs are customary allowances."

But he was interrupted by a volley of shrill sentences.

"Very likely—eggs with chickens in them."

"Do you think we drink our wine? We sell it!"

"To sit by the fire and do no bloody work—that's nice; while your children work themselves to death."

The lawyer, who had heard plenty of this before now, went on phlegmatically:

"I don't say anything about that. . . . Confound it, Jesus Christ! will you sit down? You're in the light—it's a nuisance. Now that's agreed upon, isn't it, by all of you? You will make these allowances in kind—otherwise people will point at you in the streets. There only remains the money question to discuss."

Delhomme at last made a sign that he had something to say. Everyone had resumed his seat, he said slowly in the midst of a general attention:

"Excuse me, it seems fair, what father asks. He ought to get eight hundred francs, since he could let his land for eight hundred francs. Only we can't look at it like that. He doesn't let us the land, he's giving it us, and the thing to reckon up is how much he and the mother can live upon. Yes—not more—how much they will need to live on."

"True," said the lawyer, supporting him, "that is the basis that is generally taken."

And another wrangle set in, an interminable one. The life

of the two old people was pryed into, laid bare, its necessities discussed detail by detail. They weighed out, as it were, their bread, their vegetables, their meat, calculated the clothes they would need, haggling over the cloth and wool required; they even went into their little luxuries, the father's tobacco, for which the daily penny was reduced, after endless recriminations, to a halfpenny. When people gave up working, they must know how to economize. And the mother, in her turn, couldn't she do without her black coffee? It was the same with their dog, a venerable dog, twelve years old, who ate enormously, but was useless; he should have had a bullet put into him years ago. When the calculation was finished, it was all to go over again; they must see what more could still be reduced—two shirts, six handkerchiefs a year, a farthing, perhaps, on the daily allowance for sugar. And by pruning the items over and over again, after coming to the end of the most infinitesimal economies, they arrived at a sum of five hundred and fifty odd francs, a figure which left the children disturbed, beside themselves, for they were set on not exceeding the round five hundred.

However, Fanny grew tired. She was not a bad daughter, and had more compassion than the men; neither her heart nor her skin were as yet completely hardened by their rough, open-air existence. So she spoke of ending it, resigning herself to some concessions. Jesus Christ, on his side, with his liberal notions of money, shrugged his shoulders. Moved by a drunkard's emotion, he was even ready to offer to make up the difference out of his own share, a charge which he would never really have paid.

"Come now," said the daughter, "shall we make it five hundred and fifty?"

"Yes, yes," he answered. "Let the old people be able to have a little fun."

The mother cast on her eldest born, a look, smiling and tearfully affectionate; whilst the father continued the struggle with his youngest. He had only yielded, inch by inch, battling against

each reduction, sticking obstinately at certain figures. But beneath the cold front of obstinacy which he showed, his anger was gathering strength against this provocation from his own flesh and blood, their determination to fatten on him and suck his blood, even in his lifetime. He forgot that it was so he had devoured his own father. His hands began to tremble, he scolded loudly: "Ah! you miserable lot. To think I've reared them, and they would take the bread out of my mouth. I'm sick of them, upon my word. I would sooner be rotting already underground. . . . So there's no way of making you kinder, you won't give more than five hundred and fifty? "

He was consenting, when his wife once more pulled his blouse, whispering, "No, no," to him.

"That's not all," said Buteau, after a short hesitation, "there's the money from your savings! . . . If you've got money—you have, haven't you?—you surely are not going to take ours."

He looked at his father intently, having kept this thrust for the last. The old man became very pale.

"What money? " he asked.

"Money invested—money for which you hide the securities."

Buteau, who only suspected the nest-egg, wished to make his suspicion a certainty. One evening he thought he had seen his father take from behind a mirror a little roll of papers. On the morrow and the following days he had set himself to watch, but he had discovered nothing; there was only the empty hole. Fouan from white turned suddenly purple, beneath the flood of his anger which broke out at last. He rose, crying out with a gesture of fury:

"So that's it—by God! you'll search my pockets now. I haven't a *sou*, a brass farthing. You've cost me too much for that, you scum. . . . But what would that have to do with you? Aren't I the master, your father? "

He seemed to have gained in stature with this resurrection of his authority. For years past, all of them, wife and children, had trembled before him, beneath the rough despotism with which

the head of a peasant family sways his household. If they had thought it was over with him they were deceived.

"Oh, father!" Buteau was reduced to stammer.

"Hold your tongue, damn you!" went on the old man, his hand still uplifted; "hold your tongue, or I shall strike you."

The younger son muttered, shrank back in his chair. He had felt the coming swish of the blow, was seized with the old terrors of his childhood, and he raised his arm to protect himself.

"And you, Hyacinthe, stop laughing. Don't you dare to look at me, Fanny. As sure as there is a sun in the sky, I'll lead you a pretty dance."

He was the only one on his feet, threatening them. The mother trembled, as though she feared a random knock. The children did not stir, hardly dared to breathe, tamed and submissive.

"Now, understand, I mean the rent to be six hundred francs. . . . otherwise I will sell my land and buy an annuity. Yes, and spend it all so that you shan't get so much as a stick out of me. Will you give them—the six hundred francs?"

"Oh, father," murmured Fanny, "we will give you what you like."

"Six hundred francs—very well," said Delhomme.

"As for me, I'll do what anyone likes," declared Jesus Christ.

Buteau, his teeth clenched in anger, seemed to consent by his silence. And Fouan dominated them still, fixing them with his stern gaze, like a master who must be obeyed. He finished by seating himself again.

"That is all right then, we are agreed."

M. Baillehache without disturbing himself had yielded to his drowsiness, waiting until the quarrel was over. He opened his eyes now, concluded peaceably:

"That's enough then, since you're agreed. Now that I know the conditions, I will draw up the deed. You, on your side, must have a survey, settle the boundaries, and tell the surveyor to let me have a memorandum with the specification of the lots.

When you have drawn for them, nothing will remain but to write in after each name the number drawn, and then your signatures."

He had left his arm-chair, dismissing them. But still they did not stir, remained hesitating, reflecting. Was that really all? Had they forgotten nothing, or had they concluded a bad bargain, upon which there was yet time to go back?

Three o'clock struck, they had been there for nearly two hours.

"Go away now," said the lawyer to them finally. "Other people are waiting."

They had to make up their minds; he urged them into the outer office, where as he had said other peasants, motionless, bolt upright on their chairs, were patiently waiting, whilst the office-boy watched a dog-fight through the window, and the two clerks sullenly went on scratching with their pens upon the stamped paper.

Outside, the whole family stopped for a moment in the middle of the street.

"If you like," said the father, "the survey can be the day after to-morrow—Monday."

They agreed with a motion of the head; then they went down the Rue Grouaise, each walking a few paces behind the other. Then old Fouan and Rose turned into the Rue du Temple, by the church, and Fanny and Delhomme retired down the Rue Grande. Buteau had halted in the Place St. Lubin to ask himself whether or no his father had a private hoard. And Jesus Christ, left all alone, lit the stump of his cigar again and lurched into a café—beneath the sign of the *Good Husbandman*.

CHAPTER III

The Fouans' house was the first in Rognes, facing the road from Cloyes to Bazoches-le-Doyen, which runs through the village. At daybreak on Monday, at seven o'clock, the old man issued out of it to betake himself to the rendezvous, which was fixed in front of the church, when he perceived on the adjacent doorstep his sister, La Grande, who was out of bed already, in spite of her eighty years.

These Fouans had sprung up and flourished in the place for centuries, like some obstinate and irrepressible form of vegetation. In ancient times serfs of the Rognes-Bouqueval family—of whom there were no traces left beyond a few dispersed stones of their ruined château—they had been emancipated under Philippe-le-Bel, and from that time onwards they had become proprietors of an acre, or two perhaps, bought from the seigneur when he was in difficulties, for which they paid in blood and sweat ten times the value. Then had begun the long struggle, a struggle of four hundred years, to preserve and extend this domain, with a passionate obstinacy that fathers handed down to their sons. Sections were lost and bought again; the property was sometimes a nugatory one, with perpetual disputes as to its title; it was an inheritance often swamped with such taxes that it seemed as though it must melt away. And yet, in their lust of possession meadow and corn-land had been bit by bit developed with a tenacity that was slowly victorious. Generations went under, the long lives of many men made the soil fertile; and when the Revolution of '89 arrived to ratify their rights the Fouan of that day, Joseph-Casimir, was the owner of twenty-one acres—the conquest of four centuries from the old seigneurial territory.

In '93 this Joseph-Casimir was twenty-seven years old, and

upon the date when the rest of the estate was declared national property and sold in lots by auction he was burning to make some more acres his own. The Rognes-Bouqueval family, ruined and bankrupt, after having allowed the last tower of their château to crumble away, had long ago given up to their creditors the rents from La Borderie, of which three parts of the arable land had been lying fallow. Alongside of one of these lots there was one large field in especial which the peasant coveted with the furious lust of his race. But the harvest had been bad, and he had hardly in the old pot behind his hearth a hundred crowns in savings, while if on the other hand he had thought for a moment of seeking the aid of a money-lender at Cloyes, his uneasy prudence had restrained him. Moreover, he was somewhat afraid of these estates of the nobles: who knew that they might not seize them again, some day? So that divided between his covetousness and his distrust, he was broken-hearted to see La Borderie sold at auction, field by field, for a fifth of its value to a citizen of Châteaudun, Isidore Hourdequin, formerly a clerk in the excise.

Joseph-Casimer Fouan in his old age had divided his twenty-one acres in lots of seven, between his elder daughter Marianne, and his two sons Louis and Michel: a younger daughter, Laure, who had been brought up as a sempstress and was in service at Châteaudun, was recompensed in money. But the balance of the arrangement was destroyed by marriages. Whilst Marianne Fouan, known as La Grande, married a neighbour, Antoine Péchard, who owned about eighteen acres, Michel Fouan, "Mouche" as he was called, was hampered by a wife to whom her father could leave no more than two acres of vineyard. Louis Fouan on his side, who had married Rose Maliverne, an heiress to the extent of twelve acres, had brought together by this alliance the nine and a half hectares which he was going in his turn to divide amongst his three children. By all the family La Grande was feared and respected, less for her extreme age than for her wealth. Very straight and tall she was still,

lean and hard, and large-boned, with the skinny head of a bird of prey upon her long withered neck, the colour of blood. With her the family nose was curved into a ferocious beak; her eyes were round and bead-like, and there was not a hair left under the yellow silk handkerchief that she wore on her head. On the other hand, she had kept her teeth—teeth that might have tackled pebbles. She walked with her stick lifted, never going out without her blackthorn cane, which, however, she only used to thrust admonishingly at animals or people. Left a widow when quite young with one daughter, she had driven her from home because the baggage had insisted upon marrying against her will a poor man, Vincent Bouteroue. And even when this daughter and her husband had died in destitution, leaving her a granddaughter and a grandson, at the present time aged thirty-two and twenty-four respectively, she had not forgiven, had left them to starve, wishing never to be reminded of their existence. Since the death of her husband she personally managed the cultivation of her land, kept three cows, a pig, and a labourer, whom she fed on much the same victuals; and she was obeyed by all alike in the levelling effect that her terror inspired. Fouan, when he saw her at her door, had approached her respectfully. She was ten years his elder, and he entertained for her hardness, her avarice, her obstinate determination to live and possess, the deference and admiration that was shared by the whole village.

"By-the-by, La Grande, I was just coming to tell you something," he said. "I have made up my mind; I'm going up there for the partition."

She made no answer, merely grasped her stick tighter and brandished it.

"The other evening I wanted to ask your advice again, but I knocked and no one answered."

Then she burst out in her shrill voice:

"Idiot—haven't I given you advice? No one but a fool and a coward would give up his property whilst he's above ground. I would have been bled to death and I would have cried 'No,'

with the knife in me. See other people with what's by right yours—turn yourself into the street for your beggarly children! No, no—not for me! "

" But," Fouan objected, " when you can work it no longer, when the land spoils——"

" Well, let it spoil! Sooner than let go an acre of it, I would go every morning and watch the thistles come up."

And she drew herself up stiffly, and had the look of an old vulture, fierce though its feathers were gone. Then, tapping him on the shoulder with her stick as though she would send her words home to him more forcibly:

" Listen, and don't forget this. . . . When you have nothing and they have all, your children will cast you into the gutter, you'll end as a beggar, and go barefooted. And I advise you, then, not to come knocking at my door—for I've warned you —so much the worse for you! Shall I tell you what I shall do then—eh? "

He waited, without any sign of repulsion, still her submissive younger brother; and she went in again, slammed the door behind her, crying:

" That's what I shall do. . . . Die in the street! "

Fouan remained for a moment motionless before the shut door. Then, with a gesture of resigned decision, he climbed the little path which led to the Place de l'Eglise. Hard by it was situated the ancient family house of the Fouans, that his brother Michel—nicknamed " Mouche "—had received long ago in his share of the inheritance. The house in which Fouan lived, lower down the road, came to him with his wife Rose. Mouche, who had been for long a widower, lived alone with his two daughters, Lise and Françoise, a soured, unlucky man, still humiliated at his unprofitable marriage, and accusing both brother and sister, though forty years had elapsed, of having robbed him, when the lots were drawn. He was incessantly telling the story, of how the worst lot had been left for him at the bottom of the hat, which came at last to have a semblance

of truth in it, for he was so fond of argument and so disinclined to work, that his portion had deteriorated by half its value under his management. "The man makes the land," is a proverb in Beauce.

This morning Mouche also was at his door, looking out, when his brother hove in sight, at one end of the place. He was excited over the partition, which stirred up all his old grievance—though he had nothing himself to gain by it. But affecting a supreme indifference, he also turned his back, and shut his door with a slam.

The next instant Fouan perceived Delhomme and Jesus Christ, who were waiting at a distance of thirty yards from each other. He went up to the first, and the other then drew near. All three, without speaking, turned their gaze searchingly upon the path which followed the line of the plain.

"That's him," said Jesus Christ, presently.

It was Grosbois, the Government surveyor, a peasant from Magnolles, a little village in the neighbourhood. Liable to be summoned from Orgères to Beaugency for purposes of survey, he left the management of his own land to his wife, while in the course of these constant excursions he had acquired such a habit of drinking that he was never seen sober. Big and robust for all his fifty years, he had a huge, red face disfigured by a purple eruption, and early as was the hour he was already disgracefully drunk, from a carouse that had taken place the previous night with some vine-growers of Montigny, the result of a division of land amongst the heirs. That mattered little, however; the more drunk he was the better he seemed to see: he never made a wrong measurement or an error in calculation. And people listened to him with respect, for he had the reputation of being a sly, acute man.

"Well, here we are," he cried, "come along!"

A boy of twelve, dirty and tattered, followed him, carrying the line under his arm, the stand and poles over his shoulder, while in his free hand he swung the elbow in its old case of

broken cardboard. All set off walking without waiting for Buteau, whom they had just discerned standing motionless in front of a field—the largest in the inheritance—at the spot called Cornailles. This piece of land—it was about five acres—was immediately adjoining the field where La Coliche had run away with Françoise a few days previously. And Buteau, thinking it useless to go any further, had remained there absorbed in his own thoughts. When the others arrived, they saw him stoop down to take up a handful of earth, which he then dribbled through his fingers, as though he would weigh and sample it.

"There," said Grosbois, taking a greasy notebook from his pocket, "I've already made an accurate little plan of each piece as you asked me to do, Master Fouan. Now what's got to be done is to divide the whole into three lots, and that, my friends, we'll do between us. Well—tell me what you think of it."

It was now full day, an icy wind had arisen in the pale air, where there was a constant flight of thick clouds, and it swept over the plain of La Beauce, which stretched out widely before them in its desolation and its gloom. None of them, however, seemed to heed this breath from the infinite, which inflated their blouses and threatened to carry away their hats. All five, dressed, in view of the importance of the occasion, in their Sunday best, had ceased talking. At the edge of the field, in the midst of the boundless expanse of the plain, their faces were set and thoughtful, with all the pensiveness of sailors who live alone surrounded by immensity. La Beauce, flat and fertile, easily cultivated, yet asking withal a never-ceasing effort, has made the Beauceron cold and deliberate, with a passion for nothing but the land.

"It must all be split up into three equal parts," Buteau said at last.

Grosbois shook his head, and a discussion broke out. He was a man of progress, from his transactions with large farms, and he allowed himself sometimes to thwart his clients who had but

small holdings by roundly protesting against their exact divisions.

The removals and carting away became ruinous when each lot was about the size of your handkerchief. It was idle to talk of cultivation with these bits of garden, where you could neither improve the soil nor employ machinery. No, the only way was to come to an understanding: it was a positive crime to cut up a field as if it were cake. If one would be satisfied with the arable, the other could make shift with the pasture land; so the portions could be equalised and the rest be settled by drawing lots.

Buteau, with the easy laughter of youth, took him up in a farcical tone.

"And if I only get meadow land, what am I to eat? Grass, I suppose! No, no, I want some of everything—hay for my horse and cow, corn and vines for myself."

Fouan listened with an approving motion of his head. From father to son the shares had been so arranged; and fresh acquisitions and marriages had come afterwards to extend and complete them. Delhomme, with his abundance, his sixty odd acres, had larger ideas; but he showed a desire to be conciliating. He had only come, representing his wife, to see that he was not cheated when the measurements were made. As for Jesus Christ, he had deserted the others, to pursue a flock of larks, his hands full of pebbles. When one of them, harassed by the wind, stopped still for two seconds in the air, its wings trembling, he brought it down with the alertness of a wild man. Three fell; he put them, all bleeding, into his pocket.

"Come now, enough of this talk; cut it up into three!" said Buteau gaily to the surveyor, employing the familiar "thou," "and not into six, mind! for you look to me, this morning, as if you could see Orléans and Châtres together."

Grosbois, wounded, drew himself up with dignity.

"Just you be as drunk as I am, and try and keep your eyes open at all, my boy! Who's clever enough to take my place with the elbow?"

As no one ventured to take up the challenge, he triumphed over them; and he called roughly to the small boy, who had been looking on in awestruck admiration at Jesus Christ's pebble hunt. The instrument was already fixed on its pedestal, the poles stuck into the ground, when a fresh dispute sprang up as to the system on which the field should be divided. The surveyor, supported by Fouan and Delhomme, wished to separate it into three strips parallel to the valley of the Aigre; whilst Buteau required the strips to be taken at right angles to the valley, alleging as his pretext that the soil grew gradually thinner as it neared the declivity. By the latter arrangement each would have his share of the bad end, whereas in the former case the whole of the third lot would be of inferior quality. But Fouan grew wroth, swore that the soil was everywhere the same, reminded them that the old partition between Mouche, La Grande, and himself, had been conducted on the lines he suggested. And he proved it by pointing out that the five acres belonging to Mouche would border this third lot. Delhomme in his turn made a decisive statement: even admitting the lot to be inferior, its owner would reap his advantage as soon as they opened the new road which was to pass the field at this point.

"Oh, yes!" cried Buteau, "the famous short cut from Roques to Châteaudun by La Borderie. Long enough you'll have to wait for that."

And when, in spite of his insistence, they overruled him, he continued to protest, clenching his teeth in anger.

Jesus Christ himself had drawn near, and they were all absorbed in watching Grosbois as he traced the lines of partition; and they kept a sharp eye on him as though they suspected he would like to cheat, if it were only by the fraction of an inch, in favour of one lot or the other. Three times Delhomme approached his eye to the hole in the elbow to be very sure that the line cut the pole exactly. Jesus Christ swore at the "damned little scamp of a boy," because he did not stretch the chain properly. But Buteau, in particular, followed the operation,

stage by stage, counting each foot, recasting the figures, after a fashion of his own, his lips tremulous. And with his lust of possession, his joy at having, as it were, his claws in the earth at last, there mingled a growing bitterness, a dumb rage that he could not keep it all. What a fine field it was, five acres in a ring fence! He had insisted on the partition, that no one might have it since it might not be his; and now he was in despair at the mutilation.

Fouan had looked on at the dismemberment of his property without a word, his arms hanging down.

"It's done," said Grosbois. "Now take any one of three, you'll not find a pennyworth of difference between them."

There was still in the plateau ten acres of arable land, but these were divided into sections, each one containing about an acre. One allotment, indeed, was of little more than a rood in extent, and when the surveyor asked jeeringly if he had to cut that up also, they began to dispute again.

Buteau with his instinctive gesture, swooped down and took up a handful of the earth which he approached to his face as though to taste it. Then wrinkling his nose appreciatively, he seemed to declare that it was the best of all; and letting it crumble gently through his fingers he said that it was all right if they would leave him the strip, otherwise he claimed his share of it. Delhomme and Jesus Christ refused with irritation; they must have their share likewise. Yes, yes! a third to each of them.

And they divided every field, assured by this system that no one of the three could obtain anything which should not belong also to the other two.

"Now for the vineyard," said Fouan.

But as they retraced their steps past the church he cast a last look over the immensity of the plain, until his eyes rested upon the distant buildings of La Borderie. Then with a cry of inconsolable regret, and with an allusion to the opportunity missed so long ago, when the land was declared the property of the nation:

"Ah, if my father had only chosen—it's all that, Grosbois, that you would have had to survey."

The two sons and the son-in-law turned round sharply, and they all came to a halt, casting a slow glance upon the five hundred acres of the farm, spread out before them.

"Bah!" growled Buteau sulkily, resuming his walk, "a lot of good that old tale does us. Don't the gentry always fatten on the likes of us?"

Ten o'clock struck. They hurried on faster, for the wind had fallen, and a great black cloud had just sprinkled them with a preliminary shower. Such few vines as grew at Roques were planted beyond the church on the slope of the little hill which ran down to the Aigre. Once the château had soared up, at this spot, with its surrounding park; and it was not more than fifty years ago that the peasants, encouraged by the success of some wine-growers at Montigny, near Cloyes, had first thought of laying out the hill-side in vines—its southern situation and its steep declivity suggested the choice. The wine it produced was thin, but of a pleasant sharpness, recalling some of the lighter wines of Orléans. For the rest, no one inhabitant harvested more than a few barrels, and the richest, Delhomme, owned only six acres of vine land. The cultivation of the country was confined to cereals and the production of fodder. They turned to the rear of the church, and passed along by the old presbytery; then they made their way down between the closely-planted bushes, symmetrical as the squares on a chess-board. As they crossed a rocky terrace, covered with shrubs, a shrill voice, rising out of a hollow, cried:

"Dad, here's the rain coming; I'm bringing out my geese."

It was Slutty, Jesus Christ's daughter, a girl of twelve, thin and wiry as a branch of holly, with fair, tangled hair. Her big mouth had a twist to the left, her green eyes were bold and stolid, and she might have passed for a boy in her apology for a dress—an old blouse of her father's secured round her waist by a piece of string. And if everybody called her "Slutty,"

though she owned the magnificent name, Olympe, no one was to blame more than her father, who bellowed at her from morning till night, and could never address a word to her without adding, "Take care, take care, or I'll give you beans, you dirty slut."

He had got this seedling by a vagabond woman whom he had picked up after some fair by the side of a ditch, and whom he had installed in his hovel, to the great scandal of Roques. For nearly three years they had lived a cat-and-dog life together; then one evening in harvest time the drab had departed as she had come, in the train of another man. The child, only just weaned, had sprung up, with the sturdiness of a weed; and ever since she could walk had made soup for her father, whom she both feared and adored. But her geese were her passion. To begin with she had possessed only two, a goose and a gander, stolen when they were little, from behind a farm-yard hedge. Then, thanks to her maternal care for them, the troop had multiplied, until nowadays she owned twenty birds, all supported by her marauding expeditions.

When Slutty stuck out her nose impudent as a little goat's, driving her geese before her with a switch, Jesus Christ fell into a passion:

"Look here—clear off and make the soup, or mind! . . . Besides, you dirty slut, you oughtn't to leave the house alone for fear of thieves."

Buteau sniggered, and Delhomme and the others were equally unable to refrain from laughter, this idea of Jesus Christ seemed to them so comic. Such a house it was—an old vault, with three clay walls standing, a regular fox's burrow, between piles of ruined masonry, sheltered by some ancient limes. It was all that was left of the château; and when the poacher, after a quarrel with his father, had taken shelter in this rocky nook which belonged to the commune, he had been obliged to build up a fourth wall of hard stones to fill up the gap, and had made two openings in it for a window and a door. Brambles

were piled against it, a great bush of wild roses blocked up the window; by the country-side it was called "the Castle."

A fresh shower fell, but luckily the acre of vine-land was situated hard by, and the division into three lots was made promptly and excited no controversy. Nothing was left to divide but three hectares of pasture, lower down on the bank of the Aigre; but at this moment the rain became so formidable, such a deluge descended, that the surveyor as they passed the gate of some premises suggested they should enter.

"What do you say to taking shelter for a minute at Monsieur Charles'? "

Fouan had stopped, hesitating, full of respect towards his brother-in-law and his sister, who after making their fortune had retired to live like gentlefolks on their estate.

"No, no," he murmured; "they lunch at twelve—it would disturb them."

But M. Charles appeared on the top of the steps, under the verandah. He had come out to look at the shower, and he called out as soon as he recognized them:

"Come in; come in, of course."

Then, as they were all streaming with rain, he shouted to them to go round and come into the kitchen, where he joined them. He was a handsome man of five-and-sixty, smooth-shaven, with heavy lids covering his dull eyes, and a face dignified and sallow like that of a retired magistrate. Clad in clothes of thick blue flannel, he had fur on his list slippers, and an ecclesiastical skull cap, which he wore with an air of dignity, like a person of importance whose life had been spent in nice pursuits and in the exercise of authority. At the time that Laure Fouan, then a sempstress at Châteaudun, had married Charles Baudeuil, he kept a little café in the Rue d'Angoulème. After that, the young couple, who were ambitious and greatly exercised by a desire to make a fortune rapidly, had migrated to Châtres. At first nothing had succeeded with them, everything came to pieces in their hands. They tried unsuccessfully

another tavern, then a restaurant, then even a salt-fish shop; and they despaired of ever having a penny to call their own, until M. Charles, always a man of energy, took it into his head to buy one of the houses of ill-fame in the Rue aux Juifs—a house which had come to grief owing to blemishes in the article it supplied, and to its notorious uncleanliness. At a glance he had grasped the situation, the needs of Châtres, the want there was to be supplied in a city of such importance which lacked a reputable establishment where comfort and safety should be maintained to the full standard of modern progress. Indeed, he had not started the house two years before Number Nineteen, redecorated, adorned with curtains and mirrors, and provided with a staff that was tastefully selected, became so popular that he had to increase the number of his women to six. The officers from the garrison, the Government employés—all the best society, in short, patronised it exclusively. And its success did not wane, thanks to the iron hand of M. Charles and the paternal strength of his administration. Madame Charles also proved herself exceptionally active, keeping her eye on everything, and letting nothing be lost, yet knowing how to tolerate, when it was advisable, the little thefts of her wealthy clients. In no less than five-and-twenty years, the Baudeuils had saved three hundred thousand francs; and they thought then of fulfilling the dream of their life—an idyllic old age in the arms of Nature—with trees and flowers and birds! What prevented them for two years longer was the difficulty of finding a purchaser for No. 19, the price they put on it was so high. It would be heartrending if it were necessary to surrender into incompetent hands, where it would perhaps deteriorate, an establishment built up with the best part of themselves, which made bigger profits than a farm! Since coming to Châtres, M. Charles had had one daughter named Estelle, whom he had sent to the Sisters of the Visitation at Châteaudun when he took up his abode in the Rue aux Juifs. It was a pious house, rigidly moral; and he kept the young girl there, refining on her inno-

cence, until she was eighteen, sending her to pass her holidays at a distance, in ignorance of the profession which was making the money. She issued from it only on the day of her marriage with a young clerk of the works, Hector Vaucogne, a nice-looking fellow, whose good qualities were cancelled, however, by his incorrigible idleness. And she was hard upon thirty, and had a little girl of seven, when, having at last grasped the situation, and hearing that her father wished to dispose of the business, she came of her own accord to ask for its reversion. Why should the thing go out of the family, since it was such a profitable certainty? And everything was arranged; the Vaucognes took over the establishment, and the Baudeuils, before a month elapsed, had the heartfelt satisfaction of learning that their daughter, brought up though she was to other notions, was proving a most successful mistress of a superior *bagnio*. They themselves had been for five years now in retirement at Roques, whence they watched over their grandchild Élodie, who had been sent in her turn to the school at Châteaudun, to the Sisters of the Visitation, to be brought up religiously, according to the strictest principles of morality.

When M. Charles entered the kitchen, where a young maid was whipping an omelette—with an eye on a panful of larks stewing in butter—they all, old Fouan and Delhomme included, uncovered, and appeared greatly flattered to shake his proffered hand.

"Ah, my word," said Grosbois, to make himself agreeable, "what a charming estate this is, Monsieur Charles. And to think you got it for a mere song. Yes, yes, you're a clever man—that you are."

The other bridled complacently.

"It was just a chance—a piece of luck. It pleased us, and then Madame Charles was set upon ending her days in her own birthplace. As for me, in matters of sentiment I always give way."

"White Roses," as they called the estate, was the folly of a

townsman of Cloyes, who had just expended about fifty thousand francs on it when an apoplexy had carried him off before the paint was dry. The house, planted coquettishly half way up the hill, was surrounded by a garden seven acres in extent, which ran right down to the Aigre. At the end of the world as it was, on the borders of the gloomy plain of La Beauce, no purchaser had interfered, and M. Charles had obtained it for twenty thousand francs. With it he was able to satisfy superbly all his tastes—to fish for trout and magnificent eels in the river, to go in for roses and carnations, making their cultivation a labour of love, and to have birds as well—a great aviary full of the songsters of our woods, who were looked after by no one but himself. Here the old and loving couple spent their income of twelve hundred francs in a complete happiness, which they looked upon as the legitimate reward of their thirty years of toil.

"You see," M. Charles added, "people know at least who we are here."

"Of course people know you," replied the surveyor. "Your money speaks for you."

All the others assented approvingly:

"Very true, very true."

M. Charles ordered the servant to bring out some glasses. He went down himself to fetch two bottles of wine from the cellar, all of them with their faces towards the stove, where the larks were frizzling, sniffed up the agreeable smell. And they drank gravely, letting the wine trickle down their throats.

"Ah! Gar! it's not from these parts, this wine. . . . Famous!"

"Another glass. . . . Here's to you!"

"Your health."

As they restored their glasses, Madame Charles appeared, a woman of sixty-two, with an air of respectability, her cap ribbons of a snowy whiteness. She had the thick features and huge nose of the Fouans, but the pink-and-white complexion of the cloister, the flesh of an old nun who had lived in the shadow.

Pressing close against her, her grand-daughter, Élodie, spending two days of holiday at Roques, followed her, shrinking back in her awkward shyness. White with anæmia, too tall for her twelve years, her soft, puffy features made her ugly: her hair was scanty and colourless from the poverty of her blood, while the restraint of her bringing up, with its elaborate prescriptions of innocence, had rendered her almost an idiot.

"What, is it you?" said Madame Charles, taking her brother's hand, and those of her nephews, with a gesture languid and dignified, which accentuated the difference between them.

And she turned away without taking further notice of these men.

"Come in, come in, Monsieur Patoir. Here is the animal."

It was the veterinary surgeon from Cloyes, a little, fat man, sanguine and with a purple face—the face of a cavalry-man—and a heavy moustache. He had just drawn up in his muddy trap, beneath the fierce rain.

"Poor darling," she went on, taking from the warm hearth a basket in which an old cat lay dying, "the poor darling was taken yesterday with such tremblings, and it was then I wrote to you. . . . Ah, he's not young, he's nearly fifteen. Yes, we had him ten years at Châtres, and last year my daughter had to get rid of him; I had him brought here, because he used to forget himself all about the shop."

The "shop" was for Élodie's benefit: the story told her was to the effect that her parents kept a confectioner's shop, where business was so brisk that they could not have her at home. The peasants, however, did not even smile, for it was a common saying at Roques, that "Hourdequin's farm was worth nothing like as much as M. Charles' shop." With their wide open eyes they looked at the old yellow cat, lean and mangy and miserable—the old cat which had purred in all the beds of the Rue aux Juifs, the cat which had been petted and caressed by the plump hands of five or six generations of women. How many years he had been coddled as cherished cats are, free of the drawing-

room and the bed-chambers, licking up the remnants of pomatum, drinking the water out of the toilet-glasses, assisting at things with his dumb dreamy air, observing everything through his narrow eyeballs in their orbits of gold!

"Ah, please, Monsieur Patoir," concluded Madame Charles, "cure him."

The surgeon opened his eyes, wrinkled up his nose and lips, all his face, like that of a surly, good-natured mastiff, moved expressively.

"What! You've brought me over here for that? Certainly, I'll cure him for you! Tie a stone to his neck and pitch him into the water!"

Élodie burst into tears; Madame Charles choked with indignation.

"Why, he stinks—your cat! Do you want to catch cholera that you keep such an abomination? Chuck him in the water!"

Nevertheless, in view of the old lady's indignation, he finished by taking a seat by the table, and writing out a prescription, grumbling all the time.

"Of course, if you find it amusing to be stunk out. It don't matter a button to me, as long as I'm paid. There! force that down his throat by spoonfuls every hour; and here's some stuff for two lotions—one to-night, the other to-morrow."

For some minutes M. Charles had been growing impatient, grieved at the sight of the blackening larks, whilst the cook, tired of whipping her omelette, looked on, her arms hanging down. Now he was quick to hand Patoir the six francs for his consultation, and urged on the others to empty their glasses.

"It's lunch time. Come, may we meet again soon! It isn't raining now."

They went out regretfully, and the veterinary surgeon, as he mounted into his rusty old shandradan, repeated:

"A cat that isn't worth the rope you'd use to drown it with. . . . Well, when people are rich!"

"Money from the whores—it's spent as it's got," sneered Jesus Christ.

But all, with the exception of Buteau, who had grown pale with a fierce envy, protested at this with a motion of the head; and Delhomme, the man of prudence, declared:

"All the same, a man can't be called either an idler or a fool who has known how to put aside an income of twelve thousand francs."

The surgeon whipped up his horse; the others descended towards the Aigre, by paths that were turned into torrents. They had reached the three hectares of pasture land, which remained to be divided, when the rain began again—came down in floods. But this time they persisted, hungry as they were, wishing to be done with it. Only one dispute delayed them: the third lot had no trees upon it, whereas a little copse had been shared between the two others. At last, however, everything was settled and agreed to. The surveyor promised to forward his memoranda to the notary, for the deed to be drawn up; and it was arranged that the lots should be drawn for on the Sunday following at ten o'clock at the father's house. As they got back into Roques again Jesus Christ swore loudly.

"Just wait, just wait, you bitch. I'll give you beans."

At the side of the grassy road, Slutty leisurely marched her geese along through the pelting shower. At the head of the flock the gander walked wet and complacent; and when he turned his great yellow beak to the right, all the great yellow beaks went to the right. But the child took fright and ran up to make the soup, followed by the line of long necks which were extended after the stretched neck of the gander.

CHAPTER IV

THE following Sunday chanced to be the first of November, All Saints' Day; and nine o'clock was just striking, when the Abbé Godard, the Curé of Bazoches-le-Doyen, one of whose duties it was to serve what was formerly the parish of Roques, appeared at the summit of the hill which ran down to the little bridge over the Aigre. Roques, less important than it had once been, reduced to a population of barely three hundred inhabitants, had been without a parish-priest of its own for some years, and appeared to be so little anxious for one that the municipal council had installed their ranger in the half-ruined presbytery. Every Sunday then, the Abbé Godard accomplished on foot the two miles which separated Bazoches-le-Doyen from Roques. Short and stout and high-coloured, his neck so corpulent that his head always seemed thrown backwards, he forced himself to take this exercise for reasons of health. But upon this Sunday, finding that he was late, he panted terribly, his mouth gaping open in the apoplectic face, in which his little flat nose and his little gray eyes were overwhelmed by the layers of fat; and beneath the leaden-coloured, snow-freighted sky, in spite of the premature cold which had followed the showers of the previous week, he fanned himself with his three-cornered hat, exposing his bare head, with its stubble of thick red hair partially grizzled. The road descended almost perpendicularly; and the left bank of the Aigre, up to the stone bridge, was garnished with only a few houses, a sort of *faubourg* through which the Abbé passed with tempestuous strides. He did not even cast a glance, up or down, the clear, sluggish stream, which wound in and out through the meadows, amongst clusters of willows and poplars. On the right bank was the commencement of the village; houses facing the road on either side, whilst others, thrown up at hazard,

struggled up the side of the hill. Directly the bridge was crossed, the Mairie and the school occurred, the latter an old barn, to which a story had been added, washed over with a coat of line. For an instant the Abbé paused, thrusting his head into the empty corridor. Then he turned back and seemed to be visiting the two shops opposite with a searching glance. One had a neat window adorned with various jars, and surmounted by a little wooden sign, painted yellow: *Macqueron, Grocer;* the other, its door simply set off by a branch of holly, announced in an inscription, roughly scrawled in black letters on the wall: *Tobacco, sold by Lengaigne.* Hesitating for a moment, he had just decided to pass up the steep alley dividing them, a rising path which led straight to the church, when the sight of an old peasant caused him to halt.

"Ah, it's you, Master Fouan. I'm in a hurry; I wanted to go and see you. . . . What's to be done now? tell me that. It's impossible that your son Buteau should leave Lise in such a situation, with her belly getting so big that you can see how it is with a glance. . . . She's a child of Mary, too. It's a shame, a shame!"

The old man listened with an expression of polite respect.

"Lord! your Reverence, what would you have me do, if Buteau is obstinate? Besides, the lad is right all the same; he's too young to marry, on nothing too."

"But there is the child."

"Very true. . . . Only it isn't made yet, the child. Who knows what may happen? Besides, it doesn't put the heart into a man, a child, when he hasn't enough to buy a shirt to clap on it."

He said his say with an air of wisdom—an old man who knew life. Then, in the same measured tones, he added:

"Besides, it may come right, perhaps. Yes, I am dividing my property amongst them; the lots are going to be drawn presently, after Mass. Then, when he has his share, I hope Buteau will see his way to marry his cousin."

"Good," said the priest. "That is sufficient; I count on you, Master Fouan." But a peal from the belfry cut him short, and he asked with agitation: "It's the second bell, isn't it?"

"No, your Reverence, the third."

"Oh, bother—then once more that idiot Bécu has rung it without waiting for me."

He rushed up the path, swearing as he went. At the top he almost had a stroke; his throat was puffing like the bellows in a smithy. The bell continued, whilst the rooks, whom it had disturbed, croaked hoarsely as they eddied round and round the point of the steeple, a fifteenth-century spire, which bore witness to the ancient importance of Roques. The great door was open, and in front of it a cluster of peasants waited, amongst them being the publican Lengaigne, a Freethinker, who was smoking a pipe; while, further on, by the wall of the cemetery, the mayor, the farmer Hourdequin, a handsome man with strongly-marked features, talked with his neighbour, Macqueron the grocer. When the priest passed them with a bow, they all went in after him, with the exception of Lengaigne, who affected to turn his back as he pulled at his pipe. Within the church, to the right of the porch, a man, hanging on to a rope, was incessantly pulling.

"Stop, Bécu!" said the Abbé Godard, angrily; "I've told you twenty times to wait for me before you ring for the third time." The keeper, who was the bell-man, dropped on his feet, dismayed at his disobedience. He was a little man, of about fifty, with the square-cut, bronzed features of an old soldier, with grizzled moustache and imperial, and a stiff neck, which looked as though it were incessantly choked with too high collars. He was very drunk already, and he fell now into an attitude of attention, without permitting himself to make an excuse. The priest traversed the nave, casting a glance at the benches. The congregation was scanty. On the left he could see only Delhomme, who had come in his capacity of municipal councillor. To the right, on the women's side, there were at most a dozen.

He recognized Cœlina Macqueron, withered, muscular, and insolent; Flore Lengaigne, the fat mother of children, soft and mild; Bécu's wife, tall, dark, slatternly. But the sight which irritated him most was the behaviour of the Children of Mary in the first pew. Françoise was there, between two of her friends—Macqueron's daughter Berthe—a pretty brunette, who had been brought up like a young lady at Cloyes, and the daughter of Lengaigne, Suzanne, a fair, ugly, impudent girl, whose parents were about to apprentice her to a dressmaker at Cloyes. All three were giggling in an improper fashion. While besides them, poor Lise, fat and round, and merry-eyed, displayed the scandal of her condition in the very face of the altar. At last the Abbé Godard entered the sacristy, only to find Delphin and Nénesse playing and pushing each other while they got ready the sacramental vessels. The former, Bécu's son, a lad of eleven, was a great lout, hardy and sunburnt already; he had a passion for the soil, and played truant from school to follow the plough. Ernest, Delhomme's eldest, was a fair, slight boy of the same age—an idler who always had a looking-glass in his pocket.

"Now, wicked boys," cried the priest, "do you suppose you are in a stable?"

And he turned towards a tall, thin young man, whose white face was fringed with a few yellow hairs, and who was laying out some books on the top of a cupboard:

"I really think, Monsieur Lequeu, you might keep them in order when I am not by."

It was the schoolmaster he addressed, a peasant's son, who had sucked in a hatred of his class, with some education. He abused his pupils, treating them as animals, and beneath the correctly formal mask which he exhibited to the curé and the mayor he concealed advanced views. He sang well in choir, he even took charge of the service books; but he had formally refused to ring the bell although it was the usage, declaring such a task to be unworthy of a free man.

"I've no means of discipline in church," he said, dryly; "if they were in my own quarters I would have thrashed them."

And as the curé without replying hastily donned his alb and stole, he went on:

"It's a Low Mass, isn't it?"

"Of course, and quick, too. I have to be at Bazoches at half past ten for the High Mass."

Lequeu took an old missal out of the cupboard, which he shut again; then he went to place the book upon the altar.

"Make haste, make haste," the priest repeated, hurrying on Delphin and Nénesse.

Sweating and blowing still, chalice in hand, he entered the church again, followed by the two boys, who cast about them glances of surreptitious merriment. It was a church with a single nave, a round dome, its oak panelling was crumbling to pieces in consequence of the refusal of the municipal council to vote any money. The rain-drops filtered in through the broken slates in the roof, and great patches could be seen, which indicated the extreme rottenness of the wood-work. Within the choir, which was shut off by a railing, a green stain high up spoilt the frescoe on the apse, cut in half the figure of an Eternal Father adored by angels.

When the priest turned toward the faithful, his arms extended, he was a little appeased. The congregation had grown somewhat; he could discern the mayor, his deputy, some municipal councillors, old Fouan, Clou, the blacksmith who played the trombone at High Mass. Lequeu, with his dignified air, had remained in the front row. Bécu, although he was almost drunk enough to fall, stood in the background as erect as a pole. On the women's side, especially, the pews had filled up—Fanny, Rose, La Grande, and more still, so that the Children of Mary had been obliged to close their ranks, and they were exemplary now with their eyes bent upon their prayer books. But what flattered the curé most was to see Monsieur and Madame Charles, with their grand-daughter, Élodie—Monsieur in an overcoat of

black cloth, Madame in a green silk dress—both looking grave and prosperous, setting a good example.

However, he hurried over his Mass, pattering the Latin, making the ceremony bustle. At sermon-time, without ascending the pulpit, but seated on a chair in the middle of the choir, he launched out, then lost himself, and gave up any attempts at self-recovery. Eloquence was his weak point; the words escaped him, and he murmured ahem, ahem, continuously and could never reach the end of a sentence. That was explanatory of his bishop's forgetting him for twenty-five years in the little cure of Bazoches-le-Doyen. And the remainder of the Mass was accelerated; the bell at the elevation rang out like an electric signal gone mad, and he dismissed his people with an *Ite, missa est* that was like the stroke of a whip.

The church had barely emptied when the Abbé Godard passed through it again, his hat put on all awry in his haste. In front of the door a group of women was assembled, Cœlina, Flore, La Bécu, all deeply wounded at having been galloped so. Did he despise them then, that he couldn't give them any more on a great feast day?

"Tell us, your Reverence," Cœlina asked in her rasping voice, standing in his path, "have you anything against us that you must hurry us as if we were mere scum?"

"Good Lord!" he cried, "my own people are waiting for me. I can't be at Bazoches and at Roques at the same time. Have a curé of your own, if you want High Mass!"

It was the endless dispute between Roques and the Abbé; the inhabitants asking for consideration, the priest contenting himself with no more than his bare duty towards a parish which declined to repair its church, and where, moreover, the perpetual scandals disheartened him. He went on pointing to the Children of Mary, who came out together:

"And I put it to you, how can you expect to have ceremonies when your young people are without any respect for God's commandments?"

"You don't mean that for my girl, I hope?" asked Cœlina, clenching her teeth.

"Nor for mine, of course?" added Flore.

Then he let his indignation get the better of him.

"Never you mind! I mean whom I mean. It gives me sore eyes. Look at them, with their white dresses. I can never have a procession here, without finding one of them in the family-way. No, no, you would tire out the good God Himself."

He left them, and La Bécu, who had not spoken, was left to keep the peace between the two mothers, who in their excitement were flinging their daughters at each other's heads; but her peace-making contained such a wealth of malicious innuendo that the quarrel was aggravated. Berthe—oh yes, we shall see what will become of her with her velvet bodices and her piano-playing! And Suzanne—it was a famous idea to send her to a dressmaker at Châteaudun to give her a chance of going wrong.

The Abbé Godard, free of them at last, was hurrying away, when he encountered the Charles family. His face expanded in an amiable smile, and he gave them a great flourish of his hat. Monsieur saluted him majestically; Madame made him a stately bow. But it was ordered that the curé should not escape yet, for he had not reached the other side of the Place when a fresh encounter stopped him. It was a tall woman of thirty, but looking fifty, with her sparse hair, her flabby, flat face, yellow as bran, and broken down and worn out with labour too rough for her. She was groaning beneath a faggot of fire-wood.

"Palmyre," he asked, "why didn't you come to Mass? It's All Saints' Day!"

She began in a whining voice: "I know, your Reverence; but what can we do? My brothers feel the cold—we are freezing at home. So I went out to pick up these all along the hedges."

"Is La Grande as hard as ever then?"

"Eh dear! She would die sooner than throw us a crust or a faggot."

And in her suffering voice she went on to repeat their story, how their grandmother shut her door against them, and how she had been obliged to take shelter with her brother in an old, disused stable. Hilarion, poor wretch, bandy-legged, his mouth disfigured by a hare-lip, was harmless; but in spite of his twenty-four years so soft that no one would give him work. It was left for her, then, to work for him until she was half dead, and there was passion in the care she had for him—the stout-hearted tenderness of a mother. While he listened, the broad, perspiring face of the Abbé Godard was transfigured with an ineffable kindness; his little angry eyes shone with the light of charity; his great mouth took an expression of compassionate grace. This terrible scold, who was always being carried away by his gusts of temper, had a passion for the poor: he gave them his all—money, linen, clothes—so that there was not a priest in La Beauce who wore a rustier cassock or one more full of darns.

He searched in his pocket uneasily, then slipped a five-franc piece into Palmyre's hand.

"There, keep it secret, please. I have no more for anyone else. . . . I must speak to La Grande again since she's so harsh."

This time he got clear off. Happily, as he climbed up the hill on the further side of the Aigre, choking himself with his exertion, the butcher of Bazoches-le-Doyen, on his return journey, was able to give him a lift in his cart, and he disappeared along the level of the plain, jolting to and fro, his three-cornered hat making a bobbing silhouette against the leaden sky.

By this time the Place de l'Eglise was deserted. Fouan and Rose had gone down again to their own house, where Grosbois was already awaiting them. A little before ten Delhomme and Jesus Christ arrived in due course; but they waited for Buteau in vain till noon: this precious rascal could never be punctual. No doubt he had stopped on the road to have lunch somewhere. They thought of proceeding, nevertheless; then the uneasy fear

which he inspired with his black temper decided them not to draw the lots until after lunch, to wait till two. Grosbois, who agreed to have a piece of bacon and a glass of wine with the Fouans, finished the bottle; a fresh one was broached; he fell back into his normal drunken condition. At two o'clock there was still no Buteau. Then Jesus Christ, feeling the same need of a dram which was enervating the whole village on this gala Sunday, took a turn past Macqueron's window, thrusting in his head. And that succeeded; the door was thrown open violently and Bécu appeared.

"Come in, ye blackguards," he cried, "and I'll stand a noggin."

He bore himself erectly still, growing more and more dignified as he advanced in his cups. The fraternal bond between old soldiers and drunkards, a sneaking kindness, attracted him towards the poacher; but he refrained from recognizing him when he was on duty with his badge on his arm, and was always on the eve of taking him in the very act, hesitating between his duty and his feelings. In a tavern as soon as he was drunk he treated him like a brother.

"A game of picquet? Say, shall we? And, so help me, if the Bedouins bother us, we'll cut their ears off."

They seated themselves at a table and began to play cards, shouting at one another loudly, and the glasses followed each other in quick succession.

Macqueron, wedged into a corner, with his big hairy face, sat playing with his thumbs. Ever since he had made money by speculating with the light Montigny wines, he had grown incorrigibly lazy, spent his time like a gentleman in fishing and shooting. But his appearance remained as slovenly as ever, and his coat was tattered, while his daughter Berthe flaunted about in a silk dress. Had his wife but listened to him, they would have shut up shop, given up the grocery as well as the inn, for his vanity was considerable, and he cherished secret ambitions, almost unconsciously as yet. But the wife was so fiercely set

on money-making that he allowed her, so long as he was bothered with nothing, to continue measuring out half pints to the annoyance of his neighbour Lengaigne, the tobacconist, who sold drink as well. The rivalry between these two was a long-standing one, which had never been extinguished and was always liable to blaze up anew.

For some weeks now, however, the families had lived in peace, and just now Lengaigne entered with his son Victor, a big, clumsy youth, almost old enough to draw for the conscription. The father, very tall, with a grim expression, and a little head like an owl's set on his big, brawny shoulders, looked after his land, leaving his wife to weigh out tobacco and fetch up bottles from the cellar. He owed his chief influence, however, to the fact that he was barber and hair-cutter for all the village, a profession he had brought back with him from the army, and conducted on his premises, surrounded by the tipplers, or at the houses of his customers, at their choice.

"Well, neighbour, is that beard to come off to-day?" he asked, as soon as entered.

"By-the-by, it's true; I told you to come," cried Macqueron. "Faith, you can begin at once if you like."

He brought out an old shaving basin, some soap and some warm water, whilst the other produced an immense razor like a cutlass from his pocket, and began sharpening it on a strop fastened to the case. But a shrewish voice came from the shop adjoining.

"Now, now," cried Cœlina, "are you going to make a mess on my tables? No, I won't have the glasses all over hair in my shop."

Her remark was an attack upon the cleanliness of the neighbouring hostel, where she declared there were more hairs eaten than there was good wine drunk.

"Sell your pepper and salt, and leave us alone," said Macqueron, annoyed at being scolded before company. Jesus Christ and Bécu chuckled; that had shut her up, the old woman! And

they called for another pint, which she brought them furiously without a word. They shuffled the cards and threw them on the table violently, as though they had a grudge against them. "A trump, a trump."

Lengaigne had already well lathered his customer, and was holding him by the nose, when Lequeu, the schoolmaster, pushed open the door.

"Good evening, gentlemen all."

He took up his stand in silence by the stove, warming his back. Victor behind the players was engrossed in watching their game.

"By the way," Macqueron resumed, profiting by a moment when Lengaigne was wiping the soap off his razor upon his shoulder, "before Mass just now, Monsieur Hourdequin was talking to me again about the road. . . . Something must be settled soon."

He alluded to the famous direct road between Roques and Châteaudun, which would reduce the distance by about six miles, for at present carriages were obliged to go round by Cloyes. Naturally, the farmer was greatly interested in the construction of this new thoroughfare, and the mayor, in order to win over the municipal council, depended greatly on his deputy, who was himself also disposed to a prompt decision. It was a question of connecting the road with the lower route, whereby the approach to the church would be facilitated; it was hitherto only accessible by means of a goat-path. Then the projected route followed the direction of the little narrow alley between the two wine-shops; it widened this, and made the best of the incline. Thus the ground belonging to the grocer, hitherto considerably cramped, would be easily accessible, and its value increased tenfold.

"Yes," he continued, "it seems the State is ready to help us provided we've first voted something ourselves. Don't you feel that way inclined?"

Lengaigne, who was on the council, but who had not even a strip of garden behind his house, replied:

" Me—I'm out of the thing. What good is your damned road going to do me? "

And setting to work on the other cheek, rasping over the skin as if he were using a plane, he made an onslaught on the farm. Why, these big farmers nowadays were worse than the old nobles. They had kept everything they could lay their hands on; they made the laws in their own interest, and lived on the wretchedness of the poor. The others listened, a little constrainedly, but pleased at heart that he should dare to express their hatred from time immemorial, the ineradicable grudge of the peasant against those who own the soil.

" It's just as well we're by ourselves," grumbled Macqueron, casting an uneasy glance at the schoolmaster. " I'm for the Government. . . . So our member, Monsieur de Chédeville, is a friend of the Emperor, I'm told."

Lengaigne in a moment was flourishing his razor angrily.

" There's another fine rogue for you. A man who's rich like him, with more than fifteen hundred acres over by Orgères, ought to make you a present of the road instead of wanting to take the pence out of the commune . . . dirty cur! "

But the grocer, alarmed this time, protested:

" No, no, he's a fair man and not proud. If it wasn't for him, you wouldn't have got your tobacco licence. What would you say if he took it away from you? "

Once more, growing calm again, Lengaigne set to work to scrape the chin. He had gone too far, he was mad with himself: his wife was right in telling him that some day or other his views would serve him out finely. Then they were disturbed by a quarrel which broke out between Bécu and Jesus Christ. The former got nasty in his cups, and pugnacious; the latter, on the contrary, big scamp though he was in his sober moments, grew always mellower with every glass, until by the time he

was properly drunk he was as mild and gentle as an apostle. Over and above this their opinions were radically different: the poacher was a Republican—a "Red," as they called it—who used to boast of having made the *bourgeois* jump at Cloyes in '48. The keeper, a passionate Bonapartist, worshipped the Emperor, with whom he pretended an acquaintance.

"I swear, that's so; we had a sour herring salad together. And then he said to me: 'Not a word about it—I'm the Emperor.' And I recognised him, because of his likeness on the five-franc pieces."

"That may be. . . . But he's a rascal all the same; he beats his wife and has never liked his mother."

"Hold your tongue, and be damned! unless you want your jaw smashed."

They had to seize the pint pot which Bécu was brandishing wildly, whilst Jesus Christ, his eyes moist, sat waiting for the blow in smiling resignation. They began to play again fraternally. "Trumps, trumps, trumps!"

Macqueron, rendered uneasy by the indifference which was affected by the schoolmaster, finished by asking:

"And you, Monsieur Lequeu, what do you say about it?"

Lequeu, who was warming his long, pale hands at the bars of the stove, looked up with the acid smile of the superior person, compelled by his position to be silent.

"Oh, I don't say anything; it's no business of mine."

Macqueron went and plunged his head into an ewer of water, and blowing and spluttering as he dried himself, "Look here, listen to me," he cried, "I want to do something. Yes, damn me, if the road is voted I'll give my land for nothing."

The others were aghast at his declaration. Jesus Christ and Bécu themselves, in spite of their intoxication, looked up. There was a long silence; everyone looked at him as though he had suddenly gone mad, while struck by the effect he had produced—though his hands trembled at the engagement he had made—he added:

"It's an acre at least—and no one but a swine goes back on his word—I've sworn it."

Lengaigne went off with his son Victor; he was exasperated at his neighbour's liberality: but of course his land wasn't a sacrifice, he had made enough by his robberies. Macqueron, in spite of the cold, took down his gun, and went out to see if he could not bring down a rabbit that he had seen on the previous evening at the end of his vineyard. No one was left but Lequeu, who spent his Sundays there, although he drank nothing, and the two eager gamblers engrossed in their cards. Hour after hour elapsed, and other peasants looked in and retired again. About five o'clock the door was roughly opened, and Buteau appeared. As soon as he saw Jesus Christ he cried:

"I'd have bet a franc on it. Do you want to snap your fingers at everybody? We're waiting for you."

The drunkard answered with a laugh:

"Damned old fool! It's me that's waiting. Ever since the morning I've had to kick my heels."

Buteau had stopped at La Borderie where Jacqueline, whom he had tumbled in the hay ever since she was fifteen, had made him stay to share their joint with Jean. Farmer Hourdequin having been to lunch at Cloyes after Mass, they had prolonged their merriment, and the two young men who had not parted company had only just arrived. Bécu, however, shouted out that he would pay for the five pints, but that the sitting was only postponed; and Jesus Christ, rising with difficulty from his chair, his eyes moist with sentiment, followed his brother.

"You wait there," said Buteau to Jean, "and in half an hour come and join me. Don't forget you're having dinner with me and father."

In the Fouans' house, as soon as the two brothers entered the parlour, they found quite an assembly. The father was on his feet, his eyes on the ground. The mother, seated by the table in the centre, knitted mechanically. In front of them was Grosbois, who had eaten and drunk so liberally that his eyes

were half-closed; whilst, further on, Fanny and Delhomme waited patiently on two low chairs. And a sheet of white paper, an inkstand and a pen—a rare sight in that smoky apartment, with its poor, old furniture—were set out on the table, beside the surveyor's hat,—a black hat, rusted over with age, a relic which he had sported through ten years of rain and sunshine. Night was falling: through the narrow window, the last misty radiance of the sun penetrated with a light which gave the hat, with its urn-like shape and its flat brim, an immense significance.

But Grosbois, who, in whatever stage of intoxication he might be, was always ready for business, woke up with a yawn.

"Here we are," he said. "I told you the deed was all ready. I saw Monsieur Baillehache yesterday, and he showed it me. Nothing is left in blank, but the numbers of the lots, after each name. Now we will draw for them, and the lawyer will only have to put them in; then the deed can be signed there on Saturday."

He shook himself, raised his voice a little:

"Come—I am going to prepare the lots."

With a quick movement, the children drew near: they did not attempt to disguise their distrust. They watched him, studied his least gesture, as though he were a conjuror, capable of making the portions vanish away. To begin with, he cut the sheet of paper into three with his big fingers, tremulous with drink; then on each piece he wrote a number, in an enormous, slanting hand—one, two, three! They all looked over his shoulder, watching his pen: even the father and mother raised their heads to satisfy themselves that cheating was impossible. The slips were slowly folded and thrown into the hat. A solemn silence obtained. At the close of two stupendous minutes, Grosbois declared:

"You must decide, you know! Who is going to be the first?"

None stirred: and the darkness thickened; the hat seemed to increase in size through the shadows.

"Will you draw in the order of your age?" suggested the surveyor. "You, Jesus Christ, you are the eldest."

Jesus Christ, always disposed to compliance, made a step forward; but he lost his balance and almost fell. He had plunged his fist into the hat with force enough to suggest that he was going to pull out a rock. When he had the slip of paper, he was obliged to draw near the window.

"Two!" he cried, and finding apparently something particularly comic in this number, he was seized with convulsive laughter.

"You next, Fanny," called Grosbois.

Fanny did not hurry herself when her hand touched the bottom. She felt about, shook up the lots, weighed first one and then the other.

"You're not allowed to choose," said Buteau furiously, choking with passion; he was a shade paler since he had heard the number drawn by his brother.

"Well, why not?" she asked. "I'm not looking; there's no harm in feeling them."

"Come," the father murmured, "it's all the same. There's nought better in one than in the other."

At last she made up her mind; she ran to the window.

"One!"

"So it's Buteau who has the third," said Fouan. "Pull it out, my lad!"

In the gathering darkness, no one had observed the alteration in the younger son's face. His voice broke out in anger:

"Never, as long as I live!"

"What?"

"You think I'll agree? Not I! The third lot—oh yes! the bad one. I said enough about that when I wanted it divided differently. No, no, you would like to make a fool of me. . . . Besides, do you think I can't see through your mangy tricks? Why wasn't the youngest to draw first? . . . No, no, I'll not draw at all, since there's cheating."

The father and mother looked on at him throwing himself about, stamping, clenching his fists.

"My poor lad! you're off your head," said Rose.

"Oh, you, mother! I know well enough that you never cared for me. You'd flay the skin off me, if you thought my brother wanted it. . . . All, all of you would eat me if you could!"

Fouan interrupted him roughly.

"Now, enough of this folly! Will you draw?"

"I want it all over again."

But everyone protested roundly against this. Jesus Christ and Fanny grasped their lots more tightly, as if afraid of their being snatched away. Delhomme declared that the drawing had been carried out fairly, and Grosbois, in high dudgeon, spoke of going off, as his good faith was questioned.

"Well, then, let father add to my part a thousand francs from his nest-egg."

The old man was struck dumb for a moment, then he began to stammer. He stood up, made an angry step forward.

"What's that you say? Do you want me to murder you, you snarling dog? If you were to pull the house down, you wouldn't find a farthing. Take your share, damn you! or you shall have nothing at all."

Buteau, his face rigid with obstinacy, did not flinch at his father's lifted fist.

"No!"

Embarrassed silence fell upon them once more. Now the huge hat troubled them, seeming to hinder things, with the solitary slip in its crown that no one would touch. The surveyor, to end the matter, advised the old man to draw it himself. And gravely the old man drew it, and went to the window to read it, as though he had not known its contents.

"Three! . . . You have the third lot, do you hear? The deed is ready; Monsieur Baillehache will certainly alter nothing. When a thing is done it's done. And since you're going to sleep

here, you can take the night to think it over. Come, it's finished; don't let us talk any more about it."

Buteau, out of the darkness, made no answer. The others gave a brisk assent, whilst the mother went to light a candle, to lay the table.

At this moment Jean, who had just joined his comrade, saw two interlaced shadows watching what was going on with the Fouans from the dark and desolate street. Flakes of snow, light as feathers, were beginning to float through the leaden-coloured sky.

"Oh, Monsieur Jean," said a gentle voice, "what a fright you did give me."

Then he recognized Françoise, her long face, with its strong mouth, peering from out the depths of a hood. She was squeezed close to her sister Lise, and had one arm round her waist. The two sisters were devoted to each other, and they were always being run across so clasped in each other's arms. Lise, who was taller, with a prepossessing person, in spite of her coarse features and the visible enlargement that her plump body was undergoing, kept her merriment in spite of her misfortune.

"You are out spying, then?" he asked, gaily.

"Lord!" she answered, "I'm interested in what goes on in there. I'd like to know if it will decide Buteau."

Françoise with a caressing gesture imprisoned with her other arm her sister's bloated womb.

"If he's allowed, the swine! When he has his land, perhaps he'll want a richer girl."

But Jean bade them hope: the distribution must have been concluded, the rest could be arranged. Then, when he told them that he was feeding with the old people, Françoise continued:

"Well, we shall see you again presently; we are going to the *up-sitting*."

He watched them vanish into the night. The snow fell thicker now, their garments were vaguely distinguishable with a film of fine white powder.

CHAPTER V

At seven o'clock, when dinner was over, the Fouans, with Buteau and Jean, had repaired to the shed, to keep company with the two cows which Rose wished to sell. At the further end, the animals were tied up in front of their manger, and the fumes from their bodies and from the litter warmed the building, whilst the kitchen, with its three meagre logs which had served to cook the dinner, was already icy-cold from the premature November frost. So during the winter they sat out here quite comfortably, though the floor was of mud, and were only concerned to drag in a little round table and a dozen old chairs. Any neighbour who looked in brought his light with him; great shadows danced over the bare walls, that were black with dust right up to the cob-webs on the beams; and the hot breath of the cows, chewing their cuds behind them, warmed their backs.

La Grande was the first to arrive with her knitting. She never brought her candle, standing on her great age; and the awe she inspired was such that her brother had never dared to remind her of the custom. At once she took the best place, pulled the candle near her, keeping it all to herself, because her eyesight was bad. The cane, which she never abandoned, was leant against her chair; and gleaming particles of snow set off the few stiff hairs which adorned her withered, bird-like head.

"Still snowing?" asked Rose.

"Yes, it is snowing," she answered, briefly.

And she began to knit, compressing her thin lips, jealous of speech, after having let her piercing eyes rest for a moment on Jean and Buteau. After her, the others put in an appearance; Fanny first, who was accompanied by her son Nénesse, Delhomme never coming to these *up-sittings;* and almost at the

same instant, Lise and Françoise, who laughingly shook themselves free of their mantle of snow. At the sight of Buteau, the former blushed slightly. He looked at her unconcernedly.

"Getting on all right, Lise, since I saw you last?"

"Pretty fair, thank you."

"Well, that's all right."

Just then Palmyre stealthily glided in through the half-opened door, and she was creeping into a corner as far as possible from her grandmother, the dreaded La Grande, when a disturbance in the street brought her to her feet again. It was a medley of howls of rage, tears, laughter, and hooting.

"Ah, the wretched children; they're at him again," she cried.

With a spring she had opened the door, and quickly and boldly, growling like a lioness, she rescued her brother from the tricks of Slutty, Delphin, and Nénesse. The latter had gone out to join the two others as they howled at the idiot's heels. Hilarion came in panting and breathless, lurching on his crooked legs. His hare-lip made him slobber, he stammered without being able to explain anything, and he looked feeble for his age —twenty-four, and had the bestial hideousness of an idiot. He had become very spiteful, and was furious that he could not catch and chastise the brats who were after him. This time again a shower of snowballs had reached him.

"Oh, the liar!" said Slutty, with an expression of great innocence. "Look here; he bit my thumb!"

Immediately Hilarion almost choked himself in his efforts to pour out a flood of words, whilst Palmyre tried to calm him, wiped his face on her handkerchief, calling him her darling.

"There, that will do," said Fouan, at last; "you ought to prevent his following you. Make him sit down and keep quiet at any rate. And you brats there, hold your tongues, if you don't want to be dragged home again by the ears."

But as the idiot continued to mutter, trying to prove himself in the right, La Grande, with flaming eyes, raised her stick

and brought it down with such a resounding blow on the table that everyone leapt up. And the *up-sitting* began. The women, seated round the solitary candle, knitted or sewed, or busied themselves with other work at which they did not even look. Behind them the men smoked slowly, rarely exchanging a word. In a corner the children pinched and pushed each other, with stifled laughter.

Sometimes they told each other tales; that one of the "Black Pig," who watched over a treasure, with a red key in his mouth; or, again, the story of the "Beast of Orléans," who had the face of a man, the wings of a bat, hair reaching the ground, two horns and two tails—with one of which he seized his prey, while with the other he slew it—and how the monster had devoured a traveller from Rouen, leaving nothing of him but his hat and his boots. At other times they spun endless yarns of wolves, those fierce wolves which for centuries had devastated La Beauce. Once upon a time when La Beauce, stripped so bare to-day, retained a few copses from its primeval forests, innumberable troops of wolves, driven by hunger, had issued in the winter to fall upon the flocks. Women and children had been devoured. And old people of the district could remember when after the great snowfall wolves had appeared in the towns, were heard howling in the Place Saint-George at Cloyes, and at Roques, came and sniffed at the ill-fitting doors of the sheds and sheep-folds. And similar anecdotes succeeded each other; there was the miller who, being surprised by five great wolves, put them to flight by lighting a match; the little girl whom a wolf pursued for six miles, and who was only eaten when she fell prostrate at her own door. There were others, and still others—legends of were-wolves, men turned into animals, who leapt on the shoulders of belated wayfarers, and compelled them to run until they died.

But what thrilled the girls most as they sat round the meagre light, and sent them scurrying away at the end of the evening in terror as they peered into dark corners, were the crimes of the

Chauffeurs—the famous band of Orgères, at whose deeds, sixty years afterwards, the country-side shuddered. They were a hundred who over-ran the high roads, beggars, deserters, sham pedlars, men, women, and children, all living by theft, murder and debauchery. They moved in armed bands, disciplined like the old brigands, making their profit out of the troubles of the Revolution, and laying regular siege to isolated houses, which they bombarded, and whose doors they beat in with the aid of rams.

At nightfall they emerged like the wolves from the forest of Dordau, the thickets of La Conie, and all the leafy lairs in which they had lain hid, and with the darkness the terror of their proximity enveloped all the farms of La Beauce, from Étampes to Châteaudun, from Orléans to Châtres. Amongst their legendary atrocities, the one which cropped up most frequently at Rognes was the plunder of the farm of Millouard, only a few leagues away, in the Canton of Orgères. Beau-François, the famous chief, the successor of Fleur d'Epine, was followed that night by Rouge D'Anneau, his lieutenant, Grand-Dragon, Bréton-le-Cul-Sec, Longuineau, Sans-Pouce, and about fifty others, all with their faces blacked. To begin with, they drove the farm-people into the cellar, the servants, the waggoners, the shepherd and all, at the bayonet end; then they "roasted" Farmer Fousset, the only one they had kept. When they had stuck his feet over the embers on the hearth, they applied burning straw to his beard, and wherever there was any hair on his body. They then returned to his feet, which they gashed with a knife-blade, that the flame might catch them easier. At last, the old man having been compelled to tell where his money was hidden, they let him go, and made off with a considerable booty. Fousset, who had just sufficient strength to crawl to a neighbour's house, died soon afterwards. Invariably the story ended with the trial and execution of the brigands at Châtres. They had been betrayed by Borgne-de-Jouy—a stupendous trial whose preliminaries lasted eighteen months, dur-

ing which time sixty-four of the accused had died in prison of a pestilence caused by their excrements—a trial which sent up a hundred and fifteen prisoners to the assizes, which asked the jury to answer seven thousand eight hundred questions, and ended in twenty-three condemnations to death. On the night after the execution, while they divided the spoils of the victims beneath the scaffold still red with blood, the executioners of Châtres and Dreux came to blows.

Fouan, in reference to a murder which had been committed in the Janville district, related once more the atrocities at Millouard Farm; and he had just reached the complaint drawn up in prison by Rouge-d'Anneau himself, when strange noises in the street, footsteps, pushes, oaths, alarmed the women. With pale faces they listened intently, with a horror of seeing an inrush of men in masks. Buteau went courageously to open the door.

"Who's there?"

And they discovered Bécu and Jesus Christ, who, having quarrelled with Macqueron, had just left the drinking shop, and had come with their cards and a candle to finish their game somewhere else. They were so drunk, and the company had been so alarmed, that everybody had to laugh.

"Come in, anyhow, and behave yourselves," said Rose, smiling at her reprobate son. "Your children are here, you can take them back with you."

Jesus Christ and Bécu sat down on the floor, close to the cows; they stuck the candle between them, and resumed. "A trump, a trump, a trump!" But the talk had changed; they spoke now of the young men of the district, who would have to go for soldiers—Victor Lengaigne and three others. The women looked grave, their words fell sadly and slowly.

"It's a hardship, that's what it is," remarked Rose, "yes, a hardship for everybody."

"Ah, war!" murmured Fouan, "it does a lot of harm. It's the ruin of the fields. Yes, when the boys march away, the

strongest arms are gone, we find that out soon enough, and when they come back again—Lord! they are changed, they've no more heart in their work. I'd sooner the cholera came, than war."

Fanny came to a pause in her knitting.

"As for me," she declared, "I won't let Nénesse go. Monsieur Baillehache has told us of a plan—a sort of lottery. A number of people club together, everyone pays in a certain sum; then those who draw bad numbers are bought out."

"That's a plan for rich folk," said La Grande, tartly.

But Bécu in the interval between two tricks had caught a chance word.

"War—egad! that's what makes men. Those who haven't been through it don't know. Fighting—Lord! there's nought like it. Ay—don't you remember—out there with the niggers . . . ?"

And he winked his left eye, while Jesus Christ answered with a laugh of intelligence. Both of them had been through an African campaign, the gamekeeper in the days of the first annexation, the other more recently, at the time of the last rising. So that in spite of the difference of date, they shared common recollections of Bedouins, whose ears they had slashed off and strung into necklets, and of Bedouin women whom they had blocked behind hedges and tumbled in any corner that was handy. Jesus Christ especially related a story which caused the peasants to split their sides with tremendous laughter: a great cow of a woman, as yellow as a lemon, whom he had driven along in front of him, perfectly naked, with a pipe up her back-side.

"God's truth!" declared Bécu, turning to Fanny, "do you want your Nénesse brought up to be a girl? As for me, I shall take care that you are put into a regiment, Delphin."

The children had stopped their play; Delphin raised his hard, round head; it seemed as though the brat had the instinct of the soil already.

"No," he declared squarely, with an expression of obstinacy.

"Eh? What's that you say? I shall have to knock some courage into you, you bad Frenchman!"

"I don't want to go away, I want to stay at home."

The gamekeeper raised his hand, when Buteau interposed:

"Leave the child alone, can't you? He's right. Who wants him, pray? There are plenty of others. Besides, we don't come into the world just to leave our homes and get our throats cut for the sake of a lot of fuss that doesn't concern us. For my part, I've never been away from this part of the world, and I don't feel any the worse for that."

In effect, he had drawn a lucky number, and was a true earth grubber, bound down to the soil; he knew only Orléans and Châtres, and had seen nothing beyond the flat horizon of La Beauce. And the fact seemed to be a source of pride to him: that he had sprouted up so, in his native soil, with the persistent and narrow obstinacy of a tree. He had risen to his feet, and the women looked at him.

"When they come back from the army, they're all so thin," Lise ventured to whisper.

"And you, Corporal," asked old Rose, "have you been far?"

Jean was smoking silently: a reflective spirit, who preferred to be a listener. He slowly removed his pipe:

"Yes, pretty far, you know. . . . Not to the Crimea—I was just off there, when Sebastopol was taken. But later on, in Italy. . . ."

"And what's Italy?"

The question seemed to take him by surprise, he hesitated, ransacked his recollections.

"Well, Italy—it's like here. There's land in cultivation, and woods with rivers . . . Everywhere is much the same."

"And you've fought, then?"

"Oh yes, to be sure I've fought."

He had begun to pull at his pipe again; he was in no hurry; and Françoise, who had raised her eyes, waited with parted

lips in expectation of a story. The others were equally interested; even La Grande brought down her cane with another crack upon the table to impose silence upon Hilarion, who was moaning, Slutty having invented a little game, which consisted of surreptitiously prodding his arm with a pin.

"At Solferino the heat was terrific, and at the same time it rained—oh, how it rained! I hadn't a dry thread upon me; the water went down my neck and streamed into my shoes. Yes, it's literal truth to say we were drenched."

They waited expectantly, but he had no more to add; that was all he had seen of the battle. After a minute's silence, he resumed with his calmly reasonable air:

"Lord! war is nothing like so difficult as people believe. Of course, there's the chance of falling, you know! You're obliged to do your duty. I left the service, because there are occupations I like better. Only there's good in it, too, for a man who's sick of his trade, and is waxy at the enemy coming to bother us in France."

"A nasty business, all the same," concluded old Fouan. "Everyone ought to defend his home, and no more."

Once more silence obtained. It was very hot, with the moist heat of animal life, accentuated by the powerful odour of the litter. One of the two cows had stood up to relieve itself, and the falling dung made a noise that was soft and rhythmical. From the darkness of the beams there came the melancholy chirp of a cricket, whilst all along the walls the nimble fingers of the women plying their knitting-needles seemed like the busy legs of gigantic spiders in the midst of the great blackness. But Palmyre, who had taken the snuffers to snuff the candle, snuffed it so low that she extinguished it. This caused a disturbance, the girls laughed, the children stuck pins into Hilarion's buttocks, and the harmony of the proceedings might have suffered, had not the candle of Jesus Christ and Bécu, who had fallen asleep over their cards, served to light the other, in spite of its long wick grown to the semblance of a crimson toadstool.

Palmyre, overcome at the thought of her carelessness, trembled like a school-girl who is afraid of the birch.

"Come," said Fouan, "who'll read us this to finish the evening? Corporal, you must be able to read print easily."

He went to look for a little greasy volume, one of those books propagating Bonapartist principles, with which the Emporer had flooded the agricultural districts. This one which hailed, no doubt, from the pack of some travelling pedlar, was a violent attack against the Ancient Régime, a melodramatic life of the peasant, both before and after the Revolution, with the catch title: "The Miseries and the Victory of Jacques Bonhomme."

Jean took the book, and without waiting to be pressed, began at once to read it, in a blank, sing-song, school-boy's voice, without any heed to the punctuation. They listened to him religiously.

To begin with, it dealt with the free Gauls reduced to slavery by the Romans, and then conquered by the Franks, who turned them from slaves into serfs, and founded the feudal system. And the long martyrdom began, the martyrdom of Jacques Bonhomme, the tiller of the soil, destined to be exploited and trodden down for centuries. Whilst the dweller in the town revolted, and founding the Commune, obtained the rights of citizenship, the peasant in his isolation, dispossessed of everything, even of his own person, only succeeded in emancipating himself later, and purchased with a money payment the right to be a man. And what an illusory freedom that was! The proprietor, weighed down and suffocated by ruinous and blood-sucking taxes; the property, a matter of incessant disputes, and burdened with so many charges, that it left him little to eat but stones. Then commenced a fearful catalogue—that of the laws which were aimed at this wretched individual. No one could draw up a list of them which should be complete and exact; they positively swarmed, hailing at once from the king, from the bishop, and from the seigneur. These were three cannibals who fattened upon the same corpse: the king had his quit-rent

and his tally, the bishop his tithe, and the seigneur taxed and made money out of everything. Nothing belonged to the peasant, neither land nor water nor fire; not even the air he breathed. It was pay, always pay—for his life or his death, his bargains, his flocks, his business, his pleasures. He paid for diverting the water from the ditches on to his land, he paid for the dust on the highroad that his sheep beat up with their feet in the great droughts. Whoever was unable to pay must give his body and his time, which were subject to taxes and forced labour at pleasure; he was compelled to toil, to reap the corn and mow the grass, to dress the vines, clean the moats of the château, make and repair the roads. And there were the exactions in kind, at the mill and the bakehouse, and at the vintage, which swallowed a fourth of their crops, and the right of watch and ward, which remained as a money charge, even after the abolition of the dungeons; the right of billet, of forage, and requisition which during any progress of the king or of a great lord devastated the cottages, stripped them of mattresses and bed-clothes, and drove the occupant from his own home, knowing that if he did not take himself off at once he would pay for his dawdling with the loss of doors and windows. But the most hated exaction, of which the recollection still rankled in every little hamlet, was the odious Salt Tax. With granaries stocked with salt, each family rated to purchase willy-nilly a certain quantity from the king. All the infamous extortions roused France to judgment and turned it into a sea of blood.

"My father," interrupted Fouan, "has known salt at ninepence the pound. Ah, those were hard times!"

Jesus Christ laughed in his sleeve. He wanted to dwell upon the shameful rights which the little book was contented to pass over with a modest allusion.

"And the right of deflowering, what about that? My word! the seigneur shoved his legs into the bride's bed, and on the first night, too, he shoved——"

They made him hold his tongue. The girls—Lise herself, in

spite of her tell-tale womb, had turned scarlet, whilst Slutty and the two boys thrust their fists into their mouths to stifle an explosion of laughter. Hilarion was beaming, not missing one word, as though he understood.

Jean resumed—he was reading of the justice of the time: the triple authority of the king, the bishop and the seigneur, which crushed down the poor, sweating sons of the soil. There was the law of custom, the written law, and, above all, there was the good pleasure, the will of the stronger. There was no appeal, no succour from the omnipotence of the sword. Even in the succeeding centuries, when equity protested, offices were purchased and justice sold. Worse even was the manner in which the army was recruited, the blood-tax which for long only struck at the humble country-folk. They fled to the woods, and were brought back in chains, driven with sticks; and they were enlisted as if they were being taken to the galleys. All promotion was forbidden to them. A younger son of family trafficked with a regiment as if it were a commodity that he had paid for. He sold inferior ranks in it at exorbitant prices, and drove the rest of his human cattle to the slaughter. Finally, there were the game laws, those laws which dealt with the birds of the air and the rabbits in their warren, and which, even since their abolishment in our time, have left a sediment of hatred in the peasant heart. Sport! it is the hereditary passion, the ancient, feudal prerogative which authorized the seigneur to hunt everywhere, and which punished with death the low-born fellow who had the audacity to seek game on his own land. It is making the wide heaven the cage for the wild animal and the wild bird for the pleasure of one man. It marks out the fields for squirearchies, which the game shall ravage, without leaving their owners the right to kill so much as a crow.

"One can understand that," murmured Bécu, who would have had poachers shot down like rabbits.

But Jesus Christ had pricked up his ears at the mention of

sport, and he whistled with a roguish expression. The game belonged to whoever had the skill to catch it.

"Ah, Lord help us," said Rose, simply, drawing a long sigh.

And all were similarly moved; this reading gradually weighed them down, affecting them with the painful impression of a ghost story. They did not always understand, and that increased their uneasiness. Since such things had happened in time past, who knew whether it might not be so again?

"Proceed, thou poor Jacques Bonhomme," Jean resumed, in his school-boy's voice, "give thy sweat, give thy blood; thou art not yet at the end of thy troubles. . . ."

And indeed, the peasant's Calvary was still unfolding itself. He had been the prey of all—of men, of the elements, of himself. In feudal times when the nobles went on a marauding expedition, he was hunted and driven down and carried off with the spoils. Each private war between two great lords ruined him; even if he escaped with his life, his cottage was burst, his fields stripped. Later came those great bodies of men, the worst of all the scourges which have laid waste our fields, bands of mercenaries in the employ of whoever chose to pay them, sometimes for France, sometimes against her, whose passage was marked with fire and sword, and who left behind them a land of nakedness. If the towns, thanks to their fortifications, withstood them, they swept the villages clean, in that spirit of murderous madness which then infected a whole age from one end to the other. There have been red ages, ages where our low countries, as they call them, have never ceased to cry aloud with anguish for women violated, children massacred, and men hanged. And when there was a lull in the war, the king's agents sufficed for the continued torture of humble folk; for the amount and number of exactions was nothing in comparison with the fantastic and brutal fashion of their collection, the revenue and salt taxes were farmed out; others, assessed with happy-go-lucky injustice, were levied by armed troops who col-

lected the fiscal supplies as though they had been tribute of war, to such purpose that little of this money ever reached the coffers of the State, but was stolen on the way, sustaining deductions from every thievish hand through which it passed. Then famine took up the tale. The idiotic tyranny of laws which impeded commerce and prevented the free sale of corn caused, once a decade, an awful scarcity, after a year of too ardent sunshine or of excessive rainfall, which seemed like the visitation of God. A storm which made the rivers swell, a spring without rain, the least cloud or the least sunshine, spoilt the harvest, and carried off thousands of lives. And with the sudden appearance of this disease of hunger, everything immediately rose in price, and incredible misery resulted, during which people devoured like animals the grass growing by the road-side. And inevitably, in the train of war and of scarcity, followed the pestilence, which killed off those whom famine and the sword had spared.

Like a ceaselessly recurring blight, conditioned by ignorance and dirt, the Black Plague, the gigantic skeleton of the Great Death, towers over the Middle Ages, cutting down with its scythe the lean and miserable people of the fields.

At last, when he had suffered enough, Jacques Bonhomme rose in insurrection. He had behind him centuries of fear and resignation; his shoulders were hardened to blows, his heart was so crushed that he did not feel the ignominy of his condition. He could endure for a long time to be beaten, to be robbed of everything, to be starved, without casting prudence aside, or issuing from the state of brutalized stupidity, in which all unconsciously he was ruminating confused ideas: and that would remain until a last injustice, a last suffering, made him leap suddenly at his master's throat like some household animal which has been beaten and maddened beyond endurance. Invariably, age after age, the same exasperation flames out, and revolt arms the labourers with their sickles and their prongs when they see nothing before them but death. It was so with the Gaulish Christians, the Bagaudes, with the Shepherds, at the time of the

Crusades, and later with the Croquants and the Nu-Pieds: they fell upon the nobles and upon the soldiers of the king. After four hundred years, Jacques' cry of bitter anguish passes once more over the devastated fields, to make the masters quake in their castle strongholds. Shall they be angry once more, they who are the many, shall they claim at last their share of good things? And the old apparition is evoked: huge devils, half naked, in rags, mad with brutality and lust, rushing on to ruin and exterminate, as they have been ruined and exterminated, violating in their turn other men's wives.

"Calm thy fury, son of the fields," continued Jean in his even, studious voice, "for the hour of thy triumph shall soon ring from the clock-tower of history."

Buteau shrugged his shoulders roughly; a fine business this rising in revolt, to finish by being run in by the police. All of them, moreover, since the little book had been relating the rebellion of their ancestors, listened with downcast eyes, not venturing a movement, seized with distrust in spite of their being by themselves. They were matters which it were better to discuss in an undertone; it was nobody's business to know what their private opinion might be. When Jesus Christ tried to interrupt, to boast of the necks he would ring at the next opportunity; Bécu declared passionately that all Republicans were swine; and Fouan had to impose silence on them with the stern gravity of an old man who knew more than he wished to say of such things. The other women seemed more and more engrossed in their knitting; La Grande let fall this sentence: "What we have we keep," without its appearing to bear any relation to what had been read. Françoise alone had let her work fall upon her knees, and was gazing at the corporal in astonishment that he should have read so long without making mistakes.

"Ah, Lord have mercy on us! Lord have mercy on us!" repeated Rose, with a more profound sigh.

But the tone of the book changed, it grew lyrical, in the passages glorifying the Revolution. Then it was that Jacques Bon-

homme triumphed, in the apotheosis of '89. After the fall of the Bastille, whilst the peasants were burning the châteaux, the fourth of August came to ratify the conquest of ages with the declaration of civil equality and of the liberty of man. "*In one night the labourer became the equal of the lord, who on the strength of a piece of parchment had been sucking his blood and devouring the fruit of his toil.*" Abolition of the condition of serfdom followed, of all the privileges of the nobility, of the ecclesiastical and seigneurial courts; ancient rights could be bought, taxes were equalised; every citizen was eligible for any civil or military post. And as the list continued, the evils of this life seemed, one by one, to vanish; it was the hosanna of a new age of gold beginning for the labourer, who was blarneyed for a whole page and hailed king and foster-father of the earth. He alone was of importance; let the world kneel before the holy plough. Then the horrors of '93 were stigmatized in glowing terms; and the book entered upon a stupendous panegyric of Napoléon, the child of the Revolution, who succeeded in "*rescuing it from the abyss of license to make the rustics happy.*"

"Yes, that's true," put in Bécu, whilst Jean turned over the last page.

"Yes, that's true," said old Fouan. "Those were good times, anyhow, when I was young. I, who'm talking to you here. I saw Napoléon once, at Châtres. I was just twenty. . . . We were free, we had the land—it did seem good. Then came Louis XVIII., Charles X., and Louis-Philippe. It went along just the same. We had enough to eat, we couldn't complain. And now, to-day we have Napoléon III., and still it's gone pretty well up to last year. Only——"

He would have suppressed the rest, but the words escaped him.

"Only what bloody good have their liberty and equality done for me and Rose? Does it make us any fatter, after we're worn out with fifty years' work?"

Then, speaking slowly and painfully, he drew an unconscious corollary to all this rant. How long they had cultivated the earth for the seigneur, at the whip's end, and in the nakedness of slaves without property even in their own skins; and how for this earth, rendered fruitful by their exertions, they had come to possess, through their ardent and hourly intimacy with it, a passionate love and desire, as a man loves the wife of another whom he serves, whom he can touch but possess never. And how, after centuries of this torture of concupiscence, the earth was obtained at last and conquered; it became their chattel, their possession, their only spring of life. And this lust of ages, this coveted possession perpetually receding from the peasant, explained his love for his field, his passion for the land, for as much land as possible, for the very lump of rich soil that he touches and weighs in the hollow of his hand. And yet, how indifferent, how ungrateful, was the earth itself. Worship it as one might, it would get no warmer, would not bring forth one grain the more. Too abundant rainfall rotted the crops, the hailstones cut down the wheat in the young buds, a thunderstorm bruised the stalks, two months' drought shrivelled up the ears. And beyond that, the ravages of insects, the devastating frosts, the ailments which overtook the flocks, the host of weeds which eat up the soil like a leprosy—everything was a cause of destruction. And the struggle went on unceasingly, day by day; continually one must be on one's guard, at the mercy of the unforeseen. He—he had never spared himself; and he struck out with his two fists, enraged at the knowledge that his labour had not sufficed. He had worn out every muscle of his body, had given himself heart and soul to the earth, who in return had barely nourished him, and left him now, poor and unsatisfied, in the humiliation of his senile impotence, while she passed into the possession of another male, without pity for his bones, which would be hers some day.

"That's so; that's so," continued the father. "We are young, and we give it our carcass, and we've managed, with

great hardship, to make both ends meet. Now we are old, we must go. . . . Isn't it so, Rose? "

The mother assented with a tremulous motion of her head. Ah, yes! God knows she has worked, she too, harder than any man, sure enough! Up before the others, making the soup, sweeping, scouring, breaking her back over a thousand duties, the cows, the pig, the bakery; she was also the last to get to bed. Strong, sure enough, she must have been to have made old bones at all. And her one reward was—that she had lived! She had gained only wrinkles, and was pleased enough now, when after having pinched and pinched all her life, she could go to bed without a candle, and was satisfied to live on bread and water, since she had enough of that not to die of starvation in her old age.

" All the same," went on Fouan, " one mustn't complain. I've heard tell of places where the land leads you a dog's life. In Le Perche it's all stones. In Beauce it's good still—it only asks good, constant work. Only it's growing worse. It's becoming less and less fertile, surely. Fields which used to harvest seventy bushels, nowadays don't yield more than fifty. And the value of a bushel was greater a year ago. They say that wheat is coming over from the savages. That's a bad thing to happen, a 'crisis' they call it. Is there no end to misfortune? . . . That's not what brings grist to the mill, is it? Universal suffrage! Well, but the landlord grinds us down still, they take our children away to the wars. Ah, yes, it's a fine thing to make a Revolution, but it's pull devil, pull baker—once a peasant, always a peasant! " Jean, who was a methodical person, waited to finish his reading. When silence had fallen upon them again, he read on quietly:

" Happy working man! quit not the village for the town, where you must pay for everything, for milk, for meat and for vegetables, where for so many reasons you must spend always more than your requirements necessitate. Have you not, in your village, the open air and the sun, your wholesome labour, your

innocent pleasures? What life can vie with a country life? Yours is the true happiness, far from the madding crowd! In proof of this, do not the artizans who dwell in towns repair to the country to enjoy themselves? Just as it is the townsman's one dream, to retire and adopt your pursuits; to gather flowers and eat fruit under the trees, and cut capers on the grass. Be assured, then, Jacques Bonhomme, that money is a will o' the wisp. If you have but a peaceful heart, your fortune is made."

His voice had a new intonation. He was suppressing the emotion natural in a tender-hearted fellow, who had grown up in towns, and whose soul was stirred by ideas of rural happiness. The others remained blank and expressionless; the women absorbed in their needles, the men huddled together, with their stolid faces. Was the book making fun of them? Nothing was any good but money, and they were dying of poverty! When the silence, pregnant with suffering and bitterness, began to embarrass him, the young man allowed himself to make a sage reflection.

"All the same, it would be better, perhaps, if we knew a little more. If we were in such a bad way in old times, it was because we were ignorant. Nowadays, we know a little, and certainly we get on better. Then, I think, we ought to be thoroughly taught, and have schools to teach us how to farm. . . ."

But Fouan interrupted him vehemently with the conservatism of an old man wedded to custom.

"To the devil with your knowledge! The more you know, the worse things go: didn't I tell you that fifty years ago the crops were better? It vexes the soil if you bother it—it gives what it likes and no more, the jade! Look at Monsieur Hourdequin; hasn't he wasted as much as he's worth in prying into your new-fangled ways? . . . No, no, it's no bloody good; once a peasant, always a peasant!"

Ten o'clock struck; and after this saying, which he brought out as if it were the stroke of an axe, Rose got up to fetch a dish of chestnuts which she had left in the hot embers in the

kitchen, the traditional treat on All Saints' Night. Moreover, she brought in two bottles of white wine, that nothing might be lacking for the festal occasion. Then all the stories were forgotten, the merriment grew boisterous, and everybody was busy with teeth and nails in extracting the hot chestnuts, all smoking as they were, from their husks. La Grande had dropped her share, at once, into her pocket, because she ate so slowly. Bécu and Jesus Christ gobbled theirs up without skinning them, tossing them dexterously from a distance into their mouths; whilst Palmyre, plucking up courage, began to prepare them with extreme carefulness, and then fed Hilarion with them, as if they were tit-bits of game. As for the children, they gobbled heartily. Slutty made a hole in her chestnut with one tooth, then squeezed it until a small portion of it was forced out, which Nénesse and Delphin immediately licked up. It was very good. Françoise and Lise followed their example. For the last time the candle was snuffed; and everybody drank the good health of everybody else. The heat had increased; a reddish steam came from the accumulated manure of the fodder; the cricket was chirping more vigorously from out the dancing shadows of the beams; and in order that the cows might have their share of the treat, the chestnut skins were thrown to them, and they munched them with a pleasant, monotonous sound. At half-past ten, people began to leave. Fanny was the first with Nénesse. Then Jesus Christ and Bécu went off, quarrelling, as drunk as ever when they were once out in the cold; and the others could hear Slutty and Delphin, looking after their respective parents, pushing and guiding them into their proper roads, as if they were unruly animals who did not know their stables.

Whenever the door was opened an icy blast came from the road, freighted with white snow. La Grande did not hurry herself, she tied her neckerchief round her head and put on her mittens; she did not even glance at Palmyre and Hilarion, who stole away fearfully, shivering in their rags. At last she went out, and the sharp bang of a door violently slammed was heard

as she entered her own house next door. Only Françoise and Lise were left.

"Look here, Corporal," said Fouan, "you'll see them back if you're going to the farm, won't you? It's on your way."

Jean agreed silently, whilst the two girls were putting wraps over their heads.

Buteau had risen and was walking up and down the shed with anxious, feverish steps, his face set harshly. Since the reading he had not spoken, as though he were full of what the book had told him of the earth so precariously won. Why was it not all his? A partition seemed insufferable. And other thoughts besides, confused thoughts, wrestled with each other within his thick skull—angry, proud thoughts. He had an obstinate desire not to go back upon what he had said, the anguished desire of a lover who will, and yet will not, so excessively afraid is he of being made a dupe. Suddenly he made up his mind:

"I'm going to bed now. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye! What d'you mean?"

"Well, I shall be off to La Chamade before daybreak. . . . Good-bye! if I don't see you again."

The father and mother, side by side, placed themselves in front of him.

"Well, and your share," asked Fouan, "do you accept it?"

Buteau went as far as the door, then looking back:

"No."

The whole body of the old peasant shook. He drew himself up; his old imperiousness flashed out for the last time.

"Well and good! You are a bad son. . . . I shall give your brother and your sister their share, and I shall let them yours, and when I die I shall arrange for them to keep it. Off with you; you shall have nothing."

Buteau's obstinate attitude underwent no change. Then Rose, in her turn, tried to soften him.

"But we love you as much as the others, you ninny. . . . You're quarrelling with your bread and butter. Take it, now!"

"No."

And he went off, climbed the stairs to his bed.

Outside, Lise and Françoise, with the impression of this scene still vividly before them, walked for some way in silence. They had their arms round each other's waist again, and their fingers made one indistinguishable black patch in the nocturnal shimmer of the snow. Soon Jean, who was following them as silent as themselves, heard that they were crying. He tried to put some heart into them.

"I tell you—he will reconsider it—he'll say, 'Yes,' to-morrow."

"Ah, you don't know him," cried Lise. "He'd be cut in pieces sooner than give in. No, no, it's all over."

Then in a despairing tone:

"Whatever shall I do now with his child?"

"Lord! better wait till it's born first," Françoise whispered.

That made them laugh. But they were too sad, and presently they fell to weeping again.

When Jean had left them at their own door, he resumed his journey across the plain. The snow had ceased; the sky was clear and keen, dotted with stars—a wide, frosty sky, from which a bluish radiance shone with the purity of crystal, and the infinite expanse of La Beauce unfolded itself before him, white and flat and motionless like an ice-bound sea. No breath of wind blew from the remote horizon, no sound was audible save the crackling of his thick shoes over the crisp ground. It was profoundly calm—the sovereign serenity of frost. All that he had read to-night was throbbing in his head; he took off his cap to calm himself, he had an uneasy feeling behind his ears, and he felt that it would be a relief to think of nothing. The image of this girl with her unborn child, and of her sister, troubled him also. His thick shoes continued to ring out noisily. A falling star was launched out, and it trailed through the sky silently with a shaft of fire. Down yonder the farm of La Borderie grew visible, just raising a stunted head out of its white

coverlet; and as soon as Jean had turned into the cross-path, he remembered the field which he had sown a day or two previously, hard by: he glanced to his left and recognized it, beneath the winding-sheet which covered it. The coat was light, as soft and pure as ermine, defining the ridges and the furrows, suggesting the torpid body of the earth below. How the seed slept there; with what goodly repose in that ice-bound womb, until the warm day, when the sun of spring should rouse it into life!

PART TWO

CHAPTER I

It was four o'clock. The dawn had hardly broken—a crimson dawn of the early days of May. Beneath the delicate sky the buildings of La Borderie were still slumbering in semi-obscurity: three long buildings on the three sides of the square court, in front the sheep-fold, the barns on the right, the cow-sheds, the stables and the dwelling-house on the left. The great waggon entrance, which formed the fourth side, was shut and bolted with an iron bar. On the manure heap, a solitary yellow rooster sounded the morning-call with a note as penetrating as that of a bugle. A second cock replied, then a third, and the note was repeated and echoed from farm to farm, from one end of La Beauce to the other.

That night, as was his almost invariable custom, Hourdequin had paid Jacqueline a visit in her room—a servant's small bedroom which he had allowed her to decorate with a flowery paper, chintz curtains, and some furniture of mahogany. In spite of her growing influence over him, she had been met by an angry denial whenever she had sought permission to share the room of his dead wife with him, the conjugal chamber which he barred against her from a last remnant of respect. His refusal hurt her greatly. She was aware that she would never be really mistress until she should sleep in the old oak bed with its red cotton hangings. It was dawn when Jacqueline awoke, and she lay stretched on her back, her great lids open wide, whilst beside her the farmer was still snoring. Her black eyes were languidly thoughtful in the pleasant warmth of the bed, a tremor passed through her body—the delicate, white body of a pretty girl. Nevertheless, she hesitated before she made

up her mind, and gently climbed over her master, her shift tucked up, so light and nimble that he did not notice her; and, noiselessly, her hands feverish with sudden desire, she put on a petticoat. But she knocked against a chair, and in his turn he opened his eyes.

"What! you are dressing? . . . Where are you going?"

"I'm anxious about the bread; I'm going to look at it."

Hourdequin fell asleep again, yawning, wondering at her excuse, though his head was heavy and sluggish from the burden of his sleepiness. What an odd notion, as if the bread had need of her at that hour! Then he awoke with a start, stung by an acute suspicion. Not seeing her at his side, his roving gaze searched the room in bewilderment—this servant's room where he kept his slippers, his pipe, and his razor. Had the strumpet got another of her hot attacks of lust after some farm lad? It took him a minute or two before he could answer the question; and he cast back over all his life.

His father, Isidore Hourdequin, was the descendant of an old peasant family of Cloyes, which had educated and elevated itself into a middle-class position in the sixteenth century. They had all been employed in the administration of the salt monopoly: one of them was a corn-chandler at Châtres, another a comptroller at Châteaudun; while Isidore, left early an orphan, was worth sixty thousand francs, when, at twenty-six, the Revolution having cost him his post, he was struck with the notion of making his fortune out of these Republican rogues, who were selling the property of the nation. He was exceedingly well acquainted with the district; he pryed round and made his calculations, then acquired for thirty thousand francs, barely a fifth part of their real value, the four hundred acres of La Borderie—all that was left of the old Roques-Bouqueval estates.

Not a single peasant had dared to risk his crowns; it was the middle class, limbs of the law, bankers and the like, who profited by this revolutionary measure. Besides, it was simply a speculation, for Isidore had no intention of saddling himself with a

farm; he intended to resell it at his own price, when times were less troubled, and increase his money five-fold. But the Directory came, and the depreciation of real property continued: he was unable to sell it at the profit which he had dreamed of. His land held him, he had become its prisoner, so much so, indeed, that in his obstinate determination not to let it go, he decided to farm it himself, hoping that he might make his fortune that way.

About this period he married the daughter of a neighbouring farmer, who brought him a hundred and twenty-five acres—that raised the total of his property to five hundred acres: and so it was that this townsman, who had been severed for two centuries from his peasant stock, threw in his lot again with agriculture, but with agriculture on a large scale, with the aristocracy of the soil, which had succeeded the old, feudal omnipotence.

Alexander Hourdequin, his only son, was born in 1804. He began his career by studying, with lamentable want of success, at the College of Châteaudun. He was devoted to the soil, and wished for nothing better than to return and help his father, thus disillusioning the latter of a fresh dream; for in view of his gradual growth of fortune, he would have liked to sell out and start his son in one of the liberal professions. The young man was twenty-seven when, at his father's death, he became master of La Borderie. He was all for new ideas, and his first thought in marrying was not to obtain land, but money; for, according to him, it was the lack of capital which was responsible for the farm's deterioration. The wished-for dowry, a sum of fifty thousand francs, was brought him by a sister of the lawyer, Baillehache—a mature damsel, five years his elder, extremely plain, but good-tempered. Then between his five hundred acres and himself a long struggle began, conducted cautiously at first, but becoming an embittered one after successive disappointments—a struggle, year by year, and day by day, which, without enriching him, still enabled him to live that large life so dear to the man of sanguine temperament, who is not afraid

of his appetites. Within the last few years misfortune had come to him. His wife had borne him two children: a boy, who had so strong an aversion to farming that he had enlisted, and who had recently been gazetted a captain, after Solferino; and a daughter, a frail and charming girl, his one delight, and the heiress to La Borderie since his ungrateful son had run off to seek adventures. It began with the death of his wife, in the middle of harvest. In the ensuing autumn his daughter died.

It was a terrible blow to him. The captain no longer put in an appearance even once a year, the father found himself suddenly left alone, the future closed for him, and with no incitement henceforth to work for his family. But if inwardly his wound bled, he remained to outward seeming violent and autocratic. He set himself obstinately against the peasants who jeered at his machinery and wished him ill, as one of the gentry who was rash enough to enter into competition with them. Moreover, what else could he do? He was more and more closely in bondage to his land; the labour that had gone on increasing the money that was locked up bound him down more rigidly day by day, and showed him no possible escape from it which was not ruin.

Hourdequin, with his square shoulders, his broad, high-coloured face—he had kept no traces of his middle-class education except his small hands—had always been the autocratic sultan of his maid-servants. Even in his wife's time he seduced them all, as a matter of course, which led to nothing as though he were simply taking his due. If the daughters of poor peasants who go out as seamstresses sometimes save their honour, there is not one of them who is employed on the farms but falls a victim, either to the master or to one of the hands. Madame Hourdequin was still living when Jacqueline was taken on at La Borderie, out of charity. Her father, Cognet, an old drunkard, was thrashing her to death, and she had become so emaciated, was altogether such a miserable object, that her ribs were distinguishable through her rags. Added to that, she was so ugly that

the children used to hoot her. She looked barely fifteen, although she was already nearly eighteen. She helped the cook, and was employed in the dirty work; she washed up, worked in the yard, kept the live stock clean—and this completed her degradation as everybody's Jill. However, after the death of the farmer's wife, she began to brighten up a little. All the farm lads tumbled her in the straw, not a man ever came to the farm without putting her on her back; and one day, when she had gone with him to the cellar, her master, hitherto contemptuous, desired to have a taste likewise of this ill-favoured slattern. But she defended herself furiously, scratched and bit him to such good purpose that he was forced to let her go. Her fortune dated from that day. She held out for six months, then threw her white body to him grudgingly, as it were piece by piece. From the yard she rose to the kitchen, and ranked as cook; then she took on a small girl to help her; then, when she was quite the lady, she had a servant of her own. At present, from the little slut she had been once, there had emerged a very dark girl, with an air of saucy prettiness, with the firm bosom and the strong and supple limbs of small-boned women. She had developed an extravagant coquetry, and was always reeking with scent, although, beneath this outward show, her old slovenliness was unchanged. The people of Roques and the neighbouring farmers were none the less astonished at the state of affairs: Good Lord! was it credible that a wealthy man should have been hooked by such a little baggage—without beauty or the charm of plumpness—by La Cognette, in short, the daughter of old Cognet, a drunkard whom one had seen breaking stones on the roadside for the last twenty years! A step-papa to be proud of! A fine hussy. And even the peasants did not realize that this strumpet was their revenge, the vengeance of the village against the farm, of the poor labourer of the field against the cit, who had made money and become a big landed proprietor. Hourdequin, who was at that critical age of five and fifty, was entrapped in the bondage of the flesh, and his physical need of Jacqueline was as the need of man for water or for

bread. When she wished to coax him, she smothered him with her cat-like caresses, and glutted him with licentiousness that was without limit and without shame—from which courtezans would shrink—and for the sake of one of these hours he would humble himself to the dust, and implore her not to leave him, after quarrels and terrible revolts of his self-respect, during which he had threatened to kick her into the street.

Only last evening he had struck her, in consequence of a scene she had made, in her anxiety to sleep in the bed in which his wife had died: and for the rest of the night she had withheld herself, and greeted him with a cuff whenever he drew near; for if she treated the farm lads too loyally she kept him on strict allowance, and chastised him with long fasts in order to confirm her power over him. So that this morning, in the close room, in the disordered bed where her presence still seemed to linger, he was seized again with rage and desire. For some time past he had got scent of her constant infidelities. He leapt up quickly, and said aloud: "You bitch! let me catch you at it!"

Rapidly he dressed himself, and descended the stairs.

Jacqueline had glided through the silent house, which was hardly illuminated by the breaking dawn. As she was crossing the courtyard, she showed an inclination to retreat, discovering the old shepherd, Soulas, to be already up. But her desire was so keen within her that she went on past him. Of course it was a pity! She avoided the stables where the fifteen horses were kept, and where four of the farm-waggoners slept, and made straight for the further end, for the shed which served Jean for a bed—it was merely some straw, a rug; there were not even sheets—and leaning over him in his sleep she shut his mouth with a kiss, and, shuddering and breathless, said in a low whisper:

"It's me, my old dear! Don't be afraid. . . . Quick, quick, make haste!"

But he took alarm. He was always reluctant in this place, in his bed, for fear of being surprised. The ladder leading to

the hay-loft was close at hand. They climbed up it, and, leaving the trap-door open, tumbled each other in the hay.

"Oh, you old dear! you old dear!" repeated Jacqueline, in ecstasy, with a cooing note in her throat which seemed to come from her very marrow.

Nearly two years had passed since Jean Macquart had come first to the farm. When he left the ranks he had turned up at Bazoches-le-Doyen with a comrade, a joiner like himself; and he had resumed his occupation with the latter's father, a master carpenter in the village, who employed two or three men. But his heart was no longer in his work; his seven years of soldiering had rusted and relaxed him, disgusted him with the plane and saw to such an extent that he seemed like another man. Of old, at Plassans, he had wielded his tools vigorously, not picking up much knowledge, being just able to read and write and cipher; but, withal, he was steady and industrious, and would have liked to build himself up an independent position, away from his detestable family. Old Macquart kept him as dependent as a girl, flaunted his mistresses before him, and waited every Saturday in front of his workshop to rob him of his wages. When, therefore, his mother was dead of overmuch beating and hardship, he followed the example of his sister Gervaise, who had just eloped to Paris with her lover: he ran away also that he might not have to support his worthless father. And nowadays he was no longer recognizable; not that he had become lazy also, but the regiment had broadened his horizon. Politics, for instance, which of old used merely to bore him, occupied him greatly at present; they led him to argue about "equality and fraternity." Then there were all the lounging habits, the rough but leisurely sentry duty, the somnolent life in barracks, the fierce excitement of war. So he let his tools fall from his hands, his mind went back to his campaign in Italy, and a great desire to rest came over him, to lie down at full length and forget himself upon the grass.

One morning his master sent him over to La Borderie to effect some repairs. It was a good month's work; rooms to be wain-

scoted, door and windows to be patched up, a little of everything. In his satisfaction at being there he spun out the work for six weeks. Meanwhile, his master died, and the son, who had married, went and settled in his wife's native place. Staying on at La Borderie, where rotten woodwork that required replacing was always turning up, the joiner put in some days on his own account; then, as harvest was commencing, he lent a hand, and stayed six weeks longer, so that the farmer, noticing how he took to the fields, finished by keeping him on altogether. In less than a year the former mechanic had become a capable farm-hand, who went carting, ploughing, sowing, and reaping in the great peace of the country, where he hoped at last to satisfy his need of calm. There was no more sawing and planing. He seemed born for the fields with his sluggish good temper, his love of regular work, the ox-like temperament, which he inherited from his mother. From the first, he was delighted; he had that taste for the country, which is denied to the peasantry, a taste fostered by his recollection of some sentimental reading, by notions of simplicity, of innocence, of perfect contentment, as they are to be found in little moral tales written for children. To tell the truth, there was another cause which made him relish the farm. At the time that he used to mend the doors, La Cognette had flung herself at his head, in the midst of the shavings. Actually, it was she who corrupted him, fascinated by the solid limbs of this big fellow, whose regular, massive features vouched for his robust virility. And he yielded, and then commenced again, for fear of being taken for a fool; moreover, in his turn, he was seized with an aching relish for this vicious woman, who knew so well how to excite men's passions. In his heart his innate honesty protested. It was wrong to go with M. Hourdequin's mistress, his master, to whom he was under obligations. To be sure he could make excuses for it; she was not his master's wife, she did but serve him for a trull, and since she was unfaithful, wherever there was a corner handy, he might just as well have the benefit of it as leave it for others. But these excuses did

not prevent his uneasiness from increasing, as he saw the farmer become more and more infatuated. Certainly it would end in some unpleasantness. Jean and Jacqueline were stifling their sighs in the hay when he—his ears had been continually on the alert—heard the ladder creaking. He was up with a bound, and at the risk of his life, he let himself drop through the hole, which was used for throwing down the fodder. At the same instant, Hourdequin's head appeared opposite, level with the trap. His rage was so great that he never thought of descending to identify the lover, but with a blow that would have felled an ox he hurled Jacqueline, who had just risen to her knees, back again upon the floor.

"Ah, you whore!"

She gave a yell, denied the evidence against her with a cry of rage,—

"It isn't true!"

He restrained his fierce desire to stamp his foot down and destroy the white flesh which he had seen, her nakedness exposed with the shamelessness of an animal in heat.

"I saw it. . . . Admit that it's true, or I'll kill you."

"No, no, no! It's not true."

Then when she was at last on her feet again, as she adjusted her petticoat, she grew insolent and aggressive, counting on the firm hold she had over him.

"And suppose it is, what's it matter to you? I'm not your wife. Since I'm not allowed to lie in your bed I suppose I'm free to lie where I choose."

And the dove-like coo in her voice was like a lascivious mockery.

"Come, get out of that, and let me get down. . . . I'll be off this evening."

"You shall go this instant."

"No, this evening. I'll give you time to think it over."

He stayed there trembling, beside himself with rage; and he could think of no one upon whom he might let the weight of his

anger fall. Even though already his courage failed him at the notion of casting her forthwith adrift, how gladly he would have kicked the lover out. But now, where could he find him? He had come straight to the loft, guided there by the doors which had been left open; but he had not looked in the beds, and when he came down again all the four waggoners were dressing and Jean also at the end of his shed. Which of the five? One was as likely as the other, or perhaps all five took it in turn. Yet he cherished a hope that the man would betray himself, and when he gave his orders for the morning he sent nobody to the fields, and stayed at home himself, clenching his fists, and prowling about the farm, with stealthy glances everywhere and a furious desire to murder somebody. After the seven o'clock breakfast this irritable survey of the master made the household quake. There were at La Borderie five waggoners, one for each of the five waggons, three threshers, two cowherds, or yard hands, a shepherd, and a small swineherd, twelve hands in all, without counting the servant-maid. He began by abusing the latter in the kitchen, because she had not put back the scoops from the oven in their place on the ceiling. Next he looked into the two barns, one for oats, the other for wheat—the latter a huge edifice, as high as a church, with a door fifteen yards in width, and he picked a quarrel with the threshers, whose flails he declared hacked up the straw. Thence he passed through the cow-shed, and was furious at finding all thirty cows in good condition, the passage up the centre newly washed, the stalls clean. He could think of nothing for which he could drop upon the herdsmen, until passing out again he cast a glance at the cisterns, which were also in their charge, and discovered a discharge pipe which had become blocked by sparrow nests. Here, as in all the farms of La Beauce, rain water from the roofs was hoarded as a precious thing by means of a complicated arrangement of gutters. And he asked savagely if they were going to let the birds make him die of thirst. But it was upon the waggoners that the storm finally descended. Although all the fifteen horses

in the stable had been given fresh litter, he began by exclaiming that it was disgusting to leave them to rot like that. Then half-ashamed of his injustice, and with an ever-growing rancour as he visited, in the four corners of the building, the four sheds in which the tools were stored, he was enchanted to notice a plough whose shafts were broken. Then came a tempest of wrath. Did the five rascals take a particular delight in smashing his stock? He would pay off all the blasted five of them—yes, all five, so that no one need be jealous! And whilst he abused them his flaming eyes searched theirs intimately for a sign of pallor or wincing which should denounce the traitor. Not one of them stirred, and he left them with a great gesture of despair.

Finishing his round of inspection at the sheep pens, Hourdequin thought of questioning the shepherd, Soulas. He was an old man of sixty-five, who had been at the farm for half a century, but who had not saved a penny, so drained had he been by his wife, a drunkard and a wanton, whom he had recently had the pleasure of burying. He lived in a state of terror, lest on account of his age he might soon get his dismissal. Perhaps his master would help him; but who knew whether the masters would not die first? And when did they ever give enough for one's tobacco and one's drop of something? Moreover, he had made an enemy of Jacqueline, whom he loathed with an old retainer's jealous hatred, disgusted by the rapid rise to fortune of such a recent comer. When she gave him an order nowadays his recollection of her, all in rags on the dung-heap, made him furious. She would certainly have got him dismissed if she had not felt his importance, and that made him cautious; he wished to keep his place, and avoided all conflict even though he believed himself sure of his master's support.

The sheep-fold took up the whole building on one side of the courtyard; an enclosure nearly ninety yards long, where the eight hundred sheep of the farm were only divided from one and another by hurdles: here, the mothers, in separated rings; there, the lambs; further on, the rams. When they were two months

old, the young rams were gelded and taken away to market; whilst the ewes were kept to reinforce the number of the mothers, the eldest among whom were sold off each year; and at fixed periods the rams covered the young ewes. They were Dishleys crossed by Merinos, superb animals, with their mild, stupid faces, and their heavy heads, with the huge squat muzzles like those of some human sensualists. In entering the sheep-fold a pungent smell half choked you, the ammonia-tainted fumes of the litter, the old straw remaining and being renovated with new during a period of three months. All along the walls hooks were fixed by which it was possible to raise the racks whenever the increasing height of the bed of manure necessitated it. There was some air, however; the windows were large, and the flooring of the hay-loft overhead was composed of movable joists which were partly taken up when the fodder that was stored there had diminished. It was said also that this animal heat, this warm, soft floor perpetually in fermentation, was required for the production of fine, full-grown sheep.

When Hourdequin opened one of the doors, he caught sight of Jacqueline escaping through another. She also had thought uneasily of Soulas, making sure that he had caught her with Jean; but the old man had remained impassive, with no air of understanding the cause of her access of unwonted amiability. And the sight of the young woman, issuing from the sheep-fold, which she was never in the habit of visiting, heightened the farmer's uncertainty.

"Well, Daddy Soulas," he asked, "anything fresh this morning?"

The shepherd, very tall and lean, his long face, ploughed by wrinkles, looking as though it had been carved with a bill-hook out of a piece of gnarled oak, answered slowly:

"No, Monsieur Hourdequin, nothing at all, except the shearers have come, and are going to get to work pretty soon."

The master talked on for a little, not wishing to appear to question him. The sheep, which had been kept here ever since the

first frosts, on All Saints' Day, were shortly to be let out, in the middle of May, as soon as they could be taken to the clover. As for the cows, they were never put to pasture until after the hay was harvested. This Beauce, however, parched and bare of natural verdure as it was, produced excellent meat, and it was simply the result of habit and of laziness that the breeding of oxen was unknown. Even in the case of pigs, no one farm fattened more than five or six, and these were solely for home consumption.

With his burning hand Hourdequin stroked the sheep who had run up, their heads lifted, their eyes mild and clear. At the same time the flock of lambs, confined further on, pushed up, bleating against the hurdles.

"Come then, Daddy Soulas, you haven't seen anything this morning?"

The old man had seen; but what was the good of talking? His dead wife, the drunken harlot, had taught him that women were lustful and men fools. And, perhaps, after all, La Cognette, even if he rounded on her, would prove the stronger; and then it would be upon him they would fall, to get rid of an embarrassing witness.

"I've seen nought, nought at all," he answered, his eyes blank in his immovable face.

When Hourdequin crossed the courtyard again, he noticed that Jacqueline had waited there, nervously listening, in fear of what might be said in the sheep-fold. She affected to be busy with the poultry, the six hundred birds, fowls, ducks and pigeons, which were fluttering and hopping about, pecking at the manure-heap with a ceaseless, chirping chatter; and once, when the small swine-herd upset a pail of clean water that he was carrying to the pigs, she relieved the tension of her nerves by giving him a cuff. But a glance at the farmer reassured her: he knew nothing; the old man had held his tongue. Her insolence took advantage of it. At the mid-day breakfast she exhibited a provoking gaiety. The heavy work not being yet begun, they had still only four

meals a day—their drop of milk at seven, a hot meal at twelve, some bread and cheese at four o'clock, soup and bacon at eight. They sat in the kitchen, a huge apartment, down the length of which a long table was laid, flanked by two forms. At one end the black mouth of the oven gaped, and shining saucepans and old-fashioned kitchen furniture were spread in neat array all along the smoke-begrimed walls. As the cook, a big, ugly woman, had baked that morning, a pleasant smell of hot bread issued from the bin, which had been left open.

"Well, what's gone wrong with your stomach to-day?" Jacqueline asked boldly of Hourdequin, who entered the last.

Since the death of his wife and daughter, to avoid taking his meals by himself, he sat down with his household, quite in the old-fashioned way. He had a chair at the head of the table, while Jacqueline faced him at the other end. They were fourteen at table; the cook waited on them.

The farmer took his seat without replying, and La Cognette spoke of seeing to the "toast." This was composed of slices of toasted bread, which were then broken up in a soup-tureen and soaked in wine, the whole being sweetened with "squish," as they called it—the regular expression in Beauce for treacle. She asked for another helping of it, pretended she wished to spoil the men, and launched out in jokes which caused explosions of rough laughter. Everything she said had a double meaning, reminded them that she was leaving in the evening; one was here to-day and gone to-morrow, and when one had lost a thing, one would be sorry not to have had a finger in the pie for the last time. The shepherd ate away with his expression of stupidity, whilst the master seemed equally at a loss to understand her. Jean, to avoid betraying himself, was obliged to laugh with the rest, in spite of his annoyance; he felt ashamed of his share in the thing.

After breakfast, Hourdequin gave his orders for the afternoon. Away from the farm there was little beyond a few small jobs to finish: they were threshing the oats, and finishing the

ploughing of the fallow-land, waiting until the lucerne and clover were ripe for the sickle. He kept two men with him, Jean and another, to clear the hay-loft. And the man, himself by this time very depressed, his temples throbbing in his sanguine reaction, roamed about miserably, unable to find any task in which to drown his grief. The shearers had taken up their position in one of the sheds. He went and stood in front of them, and looked on.

There were five of them—great lusty fellows, lank and yellow, squatted on their haunches, with big scissors of gleaming steel. The shepherd, who carried in the sheep, their four legs bound together as though they were leather bottles, cast them down on the flat floor of the shed, where they could only just stir their heads and bleat. And as soon as a shearer caught hold of one, it grew quiet and scarcely struggled, crushed by the weight of its fleece, which the dust and sweat coated with a dark lather. Then, beneath the quick strokes of the shears, the creature issued from its coat, like a bare hand from a dark glove —all pink and white in the amber snow of its innermost wool. Fixed between the knees of a tall, thin fellow, one ewe, lying on her back, displayed a belly which had the intimate whiteness and the tremulous skin of a person being undressed. The shearers were paid three sous an animal, and a good workman could shear twenty of them in the day.

Hourdequin watched with absorbed interest; he reminded himself that wool had fallen to eight sous the pound, and that he must make haste and sell it before it got too dry, when a loss of weight ensued. The previous year the rot had decimated the flocks of La Beauce. Things went from bad to worse. It was ruin; and the earth was bankrupt, since month by month the value of grain declined. And, his agricultural anxieties once more taking hold of him, suffocating in the courtyard, he left the farm and went to have a look at his fields. It was so invariably that his quarrels with La Cognette ended. After having

thundered and clenched his fists, he took himself off, smarting from a wound which nothing but the sight of his corn and his oats, spreading out their boundless green expanse, could stanch.

Ah, this land, how he had come at last to love it! And that with a passion in which the grasping covetousness of the peasant had no part, with a passion that was sentimental, almost intellectual: for he felt the earth as the universal mother, who had given him his life and his substance, and to whom he would go back. In the beginning, when quite young, brought up there as he had been, his hatred of college life, his desire to burn his books, had been merely due to his old habit of freedom, his fine canters over the ploughed fields, the intoxication of the open air, of the four winds of heaven. Later, when he had succeeded his father, he had loved the earth as a lover; and his love had ripened, as though he had wedded her in lawful marriage to make her fruitful. And his passion had gone on increasing in proportion to all he had lavished on her, his time, his money, his whole life, as though she were really a good and fruitful wife, he forgave her her caprices, and even her infidelities. Many times he was wroth with her, when she proved ungrateful, was over-dry or over-moist, and swallowed up the seed without bringing forth harvest. Then he hesitated, and ended by accusing himself, her impotent or unskilful husband. The fault must lie with him that she had brought forth no fruit. And ever since this period the idea of new methods haunted him, and he launched out into innovations, and he began to regret that he had been a dunce at college instead of attending lectures at one of the schools of agriculture, at which he and his father used to jeer. These schemes had swallowed up his fortune, and La Borderie barely produced enough to keep him in bread and butter until the agricultural situation should have mended. That made no difference! He must remain in bondage to his land, and lay his bones there, having held her as his wedded wife to the last. To-day, as soon as he was abroad, he began to think of his son, the captain. The two of them, they would have made things go so well! But he

thrust aside the memory of this fool, who had chosen to live by the sword. He had no children now, he would end his days alone. Then the thought of his neighbours came to him, of the Coquarts especially, landowners who cultivated their farm of Saint-Juste themselves—a father, a mother, three sons and two daughters, and who had met with no better success. At La Chamade, the farmer Robiquet, near the expiration of his lease, had given up manuring and let things go to ruin. So it was; it was bad everywhere, one must kill one's self with hard work and make no complaint.

Then, little by little, a caressing peace floated up from the broad, green fields along which he went. Some gentle showers in April had brought on the grass wonderfully. The ruddiness of the clover delighted him—he forgot the rest. Now he turned into the ploughed fields to cast an eye at the work of his two waggoners, the earth stuck to his feet, he felt it rich and fruitful, as though it would delay him with its embrace, and he was seized again by it, body and soul; it brought back his manhood, the strength and the joy of thirty. What were women beside the earth? What did they matter, the Cognettes, this one or that one, the platter out of which all men eat, and with which one is contented enough, so long as it is sufficiently clean? Any excuse which supported his base need of this wanton was enough to cheer him. He tramped about for three hours, and joked with a girl he chanced to meet—the Coquarts' servant-maid on her way home from Cloyes on a donkey, and offering a view of her legs.

When Hourdequin returned to La Borderie, he found Jacqueline in the courtyard saying good-bye to the cats of the farm. There was always a troop of them—twelve, fifteen, twenty—no one knew exactly, for they used to retire to hidden nooks in the straw to kitten, and made their appearance again with a following of five or six little ones. Then she drew near the kennels of "Emperor" and "Murder," the two sheep-dogs, but they hated her and met her with growls. But in spite of these farewells to

the animals, dinner passed off as every day. The master ate and conversed with his ordinary manner, and when the day was over there was no question of anybody leaving. Everybody went to bed; the silent farm was enveloped in darkness.

And that very night Jacqueline slept in the room of the late Madame Hourdequin. It was the best room, with its huge bed with red hangings, set in a recess. There was a wardrobe there, a washing-stand, a Voltaire arm-chair, and over a little mahogany bureau the medals won by the farmer at agricultural shows gleamed under their glass cases. When La Cognette, in her shift, clambered into the conjugal bed, she stretched herself full length, thrusting out her arms and legs to take complete possession of it, with a peal of her dove-like laughter.

The next day, when she was throwing herself at Jean's neck, he repulsed her. From the moment that the thing became serious, it was not right decidedly, and he would have no more of it.

CHAPTER II

One evening, a few days later, Jean was returning on foot from Cloyes, when, about a mile from Roques, the aspect of a peasant's cart which was returning in front of him filled him with astonishment. It seemed to be empty, there was no one on the seat, and the horse left to itself was going back to its stable at an indolent pace, like an animal who knew its road. The young man was able to catch it up without any difficulty. He stopped it, jumped up to look into the cart; there was a man at the bottom, a short, stout man of sixty, who had fallen backwards; his face was of so deep a red colour that it was almost black. Jean's surprise was so great that he began to talk aloud.

"Eh! a man! . . . Is he asleep? Can he be drunk? . . . Why, it's old Mouche, the father of those two girls! . . . My God! I believe he's dead. Well, well, this is a business!"

But, struck though he was with apoplexy, Mouche breathed still, with a faint and difficult respiration. Jean, having raised his head and laid him at full length, took his seat on the box, and whipped up the horse; he brought him back at a quick trot, in fear of his dying on the way.

Just as he emerged in the Place de l'Eglise, he happened to encounter Françoise standing in front of her door. She was astounded at the sight of the young man in their cart driving their horse.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Your father's not well."

"Where is he?"

"Come and look!"

She jumped up on the wheel and looked in. For a moment she stood in sheer amazement at the sight of that purple face, one side of which was distorted, as though it had been violently

dragged upwards. The night was falling, a great gloomy cloud which yellowed the sky lit up the face of the dying man with a reflection of fire, and suddenly she burst into tears, and ran off, disappearing into the house to acquaint her sister.

"Lise, Lise! . . . Ah, my God!"

Left to himself, Jean hesitated. However, he could hardly leave the old man alone at the bottom of the cart. The ground floor of the house, from the side of the square, was lower than the street by three steps; and it seemed to him that to carry him down that dark passage would be inconvenient. Then he bethought himself of another door on the left, on a level with the road which it faced, opening into the courtyard. This yard, of some size, was bounded by a quickset hedge; two-thirds of it was taken up by the reddish-coloured water of a horse-pond; it terminated in half an acre of kitchen and fruit garden. Then he unharnessed the horse, and it went in of its own accord and stopped before its stable, next to the shed in which the two cows were kept.

But there was a sound of tears and weeping, and Françoise and Lise ran out. The latter, who had been confined four months previously, had been taken by surprise whilst she was suckling her infant, and had kept him in her arms in her fright; and he also was screaming. Françoise mounted on one wheel again, Lise clambered on to the other, and their cries of lamentation were pitiful; whilst their father, Mouche, on the floor, still panted, his breath coming with difficulty.

"Father, won't you speak to us? Tell us what's the matter with you? My God! what's the matter with you? Is it something wrong with your head, that you can't say a word? Oh, father, father! Speak—answer us!"

"Get down, it would be better to help him out of this," Jean said, wisely.

But they gave him no assistance, only cried out more loudly. Luckily, a neighbour, Madame Frimat, attracted by the noise, came out at length. She was a tall, withered, bony old woman,

who for the last two years had been looking after a paralysed husband, whom she maintained by herself, cultivating with the doggedness of a beast of burden the one acre which belonged to them. She showed no trace of emotion, seemed to take the accident as a matter of course, and she lent a hand as though she had been a man. And they lifted him out and carried him into the house.

" Where shall we put him? " asked the old woman.

The two girls who followed them had lost their heads and could not tell.

Their father slept at the top in a small room built out of the granary; and it was hardly possible to carry him up there. Downstairs, next to the kitchen, there was a large double-bedded room, which he had given up to them. In the kitchen it was pitch dark; the young man and the old woman waited, their arms aching, but not daring to go a step further for fear of falling over some furniture.

" Come, you must make up your minds, you know."

At last, Françoise lit a candle. And just then La Bécu, the wife of the gamekeeper, entered, scenting the distaster, no doubt, with that mysterious instinct which in one minute sends a piece of news flying from one end of a village to the other.

" Well, poor dear man, what's wrong with him? Ah, I see, his blood's all flown to his head. Quick! set him down on a chair."

But Madame Frimat advised differently. What was the good of putting a man in a chair who couldn't keep upright? The best plan was to lay him down on one of his daughter's beds. And the dispute grew vociferous, until Fanny appeared with Nénesse: she had heard the news when she was buying some vermicelli at Macqueron's, and had come to see, greatly affected, when she thought of her cousins.

" Perhaps, it'll be as well to make him sit up," she declared, " so that the blood can flow down again."

So Mouche was huddled on to a chair by the table, on which a

candle was standing. His chin fell upon his breast, his arms and legs hung loosely. His left eye was open, in the distortion of that portion of his face, and he breathed harder through one corner of his twisted mouth. There was silence: the shadow of death hung over the damp room with its beaten mud floor, its leprous walls, its huge black chimney.

Jean was still waiting, nervously, whilst the two girls and the three women watched the old man and wrung their hands.

"I'd better go and fetch the doctor," suggested the young man.

La Bécu shook her head, none of the others answered; if it were a slight attack, why spend money on a consultation? and if it were the end, what good could the doctor do?

"The best thing is wound-wort," said La Frimat.

"I've got some camphorated brandy," whispered Fanny.

"That's a good thing, too," declared La Bécu.

Lise and Françoise, still in a state of stupor, neither heard nor decided anything. One was nursing Jules, her little one; the other had her hands occupied with a glass of water that the father had refused to drink. Fanny, seeing this, nudged Nénesse, who was intent upon the convulsed features of the dying man.

"You run home and ask them to give you the little bottle of camphorated brandy, on the left-hand side of the cupboard. . . . You understand? In the cupboard, on the left-hand side. And call at your grandfather Fouan's, and at your aunt La Grande's, and tell them that Uncle Mouche is very ill. Run as hard as you can!"

When the small boy had disappeared with a bound, the women went on discussing the case. La Bécu knew of a gentleman who had been saved, by having the soles of his feet tickled for three hours on end. La Frimat remembering that there was some linden left out of the pennyworth bought last winter for her man, went to get it; and she came back with the little bag. Lise was lighting the fire, having handed her baby to Françoise, when Nénesse reappeared.

"Gran'papa had gone to bed. . . . La Grande had said that if Uncle Mouche hadn't drunk so much he wouldn't have had heart disease."

But Fanny looked at the bottle which he handed her, and cried out:

"Idiot! I told you on the left. You've brought me Eau-de-Cologne."

"That's good too," repeated La Bécu.

They forcibly administered to the old man a dose of linden, introducing the spoon between his fixed teeth. Then they rubbed his head with Eau-de-Cologne. And it did him no good, it was heart-rending. His face was still black; and they were obliged to raise him in the chair again, for he was falling to pieces, and had almost slipped to the ground.

"Oh," murmured Nénesse, who had gone back to the door, "isn't it just going to rain. The sky *is* a funny colour."

"Yes," said Jean, "I saw a tremendous cloud gathering." And then, as though he were reminded of his previous idea:

"All the same, I'm quite ready to go and fetch the doctor, if you like."

Lise and Françoise looked at each other anxiously. At last the latter, with the generosity of youth, decided.

"Yes, yes, Corporal! Go to Cloyes and fetch Monsieur Finet. It shan't be said we didn't do our duty by him."

Their confusion was so great that the horse had not even been unharnessed, and Jean had only to leap into the cart. There was a clanking noise of iron and the rattle of wheels. And then La Frimat began to talk of a priest; but the others with a gesture said that they had given enough trouble already. Nénesse having offered to walk the two miles to Bazoches-le-Doyen, his mother grew vexed. She was certainly not going to let him run wild on a threatening night like this, beneath such a fearful soot-coloured sky. Besides, since the old man could neither understand nor speak, it would be about as much good to bring out the curé for

a mile-stone. The cuckoo clock of painted wood struck ten. It was a surprise to think that they had been there for two hours without doing any good! But no one talked of retiring, the sight fascinated them, and they were anxious to see the end. There was a ten-pound loaf in the bin, with a knife beside it. The daughters, worn out with hunger, in spite of their grief, began mechanically to cut themselves slices, which they ate without butter, almost unconsciously. The three women imitated them, and the loaf grew smaller; somebody was constantly slicing a piece off it and munching it. They had not lit another candle; they had forgotten even to snuff the one which was lit. And it was not lively, this dark and bare kitchen of these poor peasants, with the figure huddled by the table in its death agony. Suddenly, half-an-hour after Jean's departure, Mouche lurched forward and fell on to the floor. He no longer breathed; he was dead.

"What did I tell you? You would go and send for the doctor," cried La Bécu, in her rasping voice.

Françoise and Lise burst into renewed weeping. By an instinctive impulse they feel into each other's arms, in their tenderness of adoring sisters. Now they repeated with broken phrases:

"God help us! We're only two now. . . . It's over, there's only us two now. . . . My God, what is to become of us?"

They could not, however, leave the dead man on the ground. With a few touches La Frimat and La Bécu did what was necessary. As they did not dare to move the body, they took a mattress off the bed, brought it in and laid Mouche upon it, drawing a sheet over him up to his chin. In the meantime, Fanny had lit the candles in two more candlesticks, and placed them on the floor like tapers, one on each side of his head. For the present that would do very well; only the left eye, which they had pushed shut with their fingers three times, obstinately insisted on opening, and it seemed to watch everybody, from the livid, agonised face which relieved the whiteness of the sheet.

Lise had at last put Jules to bed, and the vigil commenced. Twice already, Fanny and La Bécu had said that they must be going, as La Frimat had offered to stay the night with the girls; but they never went, continued to talk together in a low voice, casting sideway glances at the corpse; whilst Nénesse had possessed himself of the bottle of Eau-de-Cologne and was emptying it on his hair and hands. It struck midnight, La Bécu raised her voice:

"Only to think of this Monsieur Finet. He gives you time to die in, he does. More than two hours to fetch him from Cloyes!" The door which looked on the yard had been left open, a great gust of wind entered and extinguished the lights on each side of the dead man. This frightened them all, and as they re-lit the candles the breath of the storm began again more violently, whilst a prolonged moaning, rising to a roar, issued from the dark immensity of the country side. It was like the rush of a devastating army drawing near to the accompaniment of the crashing of trees, and of the murmur of fields rent asunder. They had run to the door, and they saw a copper-coloured cloud wreathing itself as it flew through the livid sky. Suddenly there was a sound like the discharge of musketry, and a shower of stones descended, beating and rebounding at their feet.

Then a cry went up from them, a cry of defeat and despair.

"The hail! The hail!"

Pale and rebellious at the scourge, they watched in an angry absorption. It lasted barely ten minutes. There was no thunder, but great sulphurous flashes of lightning without ceasing seemed to run right down to the edge of the earth, with broad streaks of phosphorus; and the night was no longer dark, but the innumerable hail-stones were lit up with pale reflections, as though it had rained fragments of glass. The noise grew deafening, a cannonade, a train driven at full steam across an iron bridge upon a journey without an end. The wind blew furiously, the slanting stones cut down everything, piled themselves up, covered the ground with a white canopy.

"Lord hêlp us! it's the hail! Ah, what a misfortune! Just look at 'em—as big as fowls' eggs!"

They dared not venture into the yard to pick some of them up. The violence of the hurricane went on increasing, every pane in the window was shattered. It had gathered so much fury that a hail-stone came and smashed a pitcher, whilst others rolled right up to the mattress of the dead man.

"Not more than five of them to the pound," said La Bécu, weighing them.

Fanny and La Frimat made a despairing gesture.

"Everything's spoilt, it's nothing else than ruin."

It was over. They heard the gallop of the calamity retreating into the distance, and a sepulchral silence ensued. The sky behind the cloud had become of an inky blackness. A fine dense rain poured down noiselessly. It was only possible to see the thick layer of hail-stones on the ground, a whitening cloth which had as it were a radiance of its own, like the pale gleam of millions of glow-worms stretching out to infinity.

Nénesse had rushed out, and he came back with a regular icicle, as large as his fist, jagged and irregular; and La Frimat, quite beside herself, could no longer resist her desire to go out and see.

"I'm going to fetch my lantern; I must know how much damage it's done."

Fanny restrained herself for a minute longer. She continued her complaints. What a piece of work! What havoc it must have played with the vegetables and with the fruit trees! The wheat, the oats, the barley were not big enough to have suffered much. But the vines—oh, the vines! And from the door, her eyes groped into the impenetrable thickness of the night; she trembled in a fever of anxiety, seeking to estimate the damage, and exaggerating it, imagining that she would see the country devastated as if by cannon, and losing blood from every wound.

"Well, my dears," she said in conclusion, "I shall borrow a lantern from you, and run round to our vines."

She lit one of the two lanterns, and disappeared with Nénesse. La Bécu, who had no land, was at heart indifferent. She sighed and implored Heaven out of her habit of lachrymose sympathy. Curiosity, however, sent her incessantly to the door; and she planted herself there with lively interest when she saw the village was becoming visible in numerous little dots of light. Through a gap in the yard, between the cow-shed and another building, there was a view of all Rognes. No doubt the hail-storm had awakened the peasants, and each had been infected by the same impatience to examine his field, and was too anxious to wait for day. So that one by one the lanterns appeared and multiplied, flashing and dancing all around. And La Bécu, who knew the lie of the houses, could fix a name to each.

"Look, there's La Grande lighting up; and there's someone out at Fouan's—and yonder, there's Macqueron, and Lengaigne next. Lord have mercy on 'em! Poor people, it's heartbreaking! . . . Well, so much the worse, I'm going."

Lise and Françoise were left alone with the body of their father. The patter of the rain continued; little gusts of moist air just skimmed the ground, and made the candles gutter. They might have shut the door, but neither of them thought of it, so engrossed and moved were they in spite of the sorrow at home, by the drama which was proceeding out of doors. Wasn't it enough, then, to have death in the house? The good Lord was taking everything; who knew whether there would be left so much as a bit of bread to eat?

"Poor father," murmured Françoise, "how angry it would have made him. It's best that he can't see it."

And as her sister took up the other lantern, she asked:

"Where are you going?"

"I'm thinking of the peas and beans. I'll be back in a minute."

Lise crossed the yard, beneath the rain, and passed into the kitchen garden. There was no one but Françoise left with the old man. She still stood upon the threshold, moved exceedingly

by the rapid flitting to and fro of the lantern. She imagined that she heard the sound of tears and complaining.

"Ah, what is it?" she cried; "what has happened?"

There was no answer, and the lantern went and came more quickly, as though in consternation.

"Say, are the beans crushed? . . . And the peas, have they been hurt? Ah, Lord! and the fruit and the lettuces?"

But a cry of grief which she heard distinctly decided her. She gathered up her petticoats and rushed out in the rain to join her sister. And the dead man was left alone in the empty kitchen, stiff beneath his sheet, between the two candles, smoking and sombre. His left eye, obstinately open, gazed up at the ancient joists of the ceiling.

Ah! what ravages this corner of the earth had sustained! What lamentations issued from the scene of the disaster as it was dimly imaged by the flickering light of the lanterns! The one Lise and Françoise carried was so drenched with rain that its panes were hardly illuminated, and they held it close to the beds and distinguished vaguely in the narrow circle of its rays the beans and peas beaten down, the lettuces so slashed and mutilated that it was not worth thinking even of making use of the leaves.

But the trees especially had suffered; the small branches and the fruit had been cut off, as if with a knife; the very trunks were bruised and losing their sap through clefts in the bark. Further on, in the vineyards, things were worse; the lanterns were swarming, and they danced up and down angrily to an accompaniment of groaning and swearing. The props were cut in two, the flowering bunches were lying on the ground amid a ruin of sticks and branches. It was not only the crop of the year which was lost, but the plants themselves, which deprived of their roots could only rot and die. Nobody thought of the rain; a dog was barking furiously; and women burst into tears, as if they were standing by a grave. Macqueron and Lengaigne, in spite of the jealousy between them, helped each other with their lights, and passed from one to the other, shouting out oaths more liberally as

the full extent of the disaster grew apparent; a wan and transient spectacle speedily swallowed up behind them in the shadows. Although he had his land no longer, old Fouan was as distressed as any, and wanted to see. Little by little they all lost their tempers; to think that it was possible to lose in a quarter of an hour the fruit of a year's labour! What had they done to be punished so? There was no justice or safety, but people were ruined by scourges without reason and killed by caprice. La Grande in her rage suddenly gathered up a handful of pebbles and flung them in the air as though she would smash in the sky, which was no longer distinguishable. And she bellowed:

"Blasted swine! why can't you bloody well leave us alone, up there?"

On the mattress in the kitchen, Mouche, left to himself, gazed up at the ceiling with his stationary eye, when two carriages stopped before the door. Jean had brought M. Finet at last, having waited for him at his house for nearly three hours; and he had come back in the cart, while the doctor had brought his gig. The latter, a tall, lean man, his face jaundiced by extinct ambitions, entered roughly. In his heart he loathed these peasants who composed his practice, and whom he held responsible for his mediocrity.

"What, no one here? He's better, then?"

Then, perceiving the corpse:

"No, too late! I told you so, I didn't want to come. Always the same story, they send for me when they are dead."

His useless expedition, in the dead of night, irritated him; and Lise and Françoise entering just then, his exasperation reached a climax, when he learnt that they had waited for two hours before sending for him.

"Then you've killed him, confound you! What insanity! Eau-de-Cologne and linden for apoplexy! Not a soul with him besides. Certainly, that is not the way to cure a man."

"But, monsieur," Lise stammered tearfully, "it's because of the hail."

M. Finet grew interested; he calmed himself. What! they had had a hail-storm? From living with the peasantry he had become infected with their passions. Jean also drew near, and both cried out in amazement, for they had not seen a hail-stone on their way from Cloyes. Spared over there, devastated here—and only a mile or so between them—what a piece of bad luck to have been on the wrong side! Then as Fanny returned with the lantern, followed by La Bécu and La Frimat, all three in tears, and lavishing their details of the horrors they had seen, the doctor gravely agreed.

"It's a misfortune, a great misfortune—there's no greater misfortune for the country."

A deep sound, a sort of bubbling noise interrupted them. It came from the dead man, whom they had forgotten between the two candles. They all grew silent; the women crossed themselves.

CHAPTER III

A MONTH elapsed. Old Fouan, the guardian appointed over Françoise, who was entering on her fifteenth year, persuaded them—herself and Lise, her sister, who was ten years her elder—to let their land, with the exception of a piece of meadow, to their cousin Delhomme, in order that it might be properly kept up and cultivated. Now that the two girls were left alone, with neither father nor brother in the house, they would have been obliged to take on a man, which would have been ruinous in view of the increasing price of labour. Delhomme was thereby doing them a simple favour, for he undertook to end the arrangement whenever the marriage of either should necessitate a division of the inheritance between them.

Lise and Françoise, however, though their horse also—which was no longer of any use to them—they gave up to their cousin, retained the two cows, La Coliche and Blanchette, as well as the donkey Gédéon. They kept also their half-acre of kitchen garden, which the elder determined to manage, whilst the younger was to have charge of the animals. To be sure this would involve plenty of hard work, but they were in good health, thank God! and they could see their way to accomplish it.

The first few weeks were very hard; the damage caused by the hail had to be repaired, the vegetables to be dug out and replanted; and for this reason Jean was induced to lend them a helping hand. An intimacy had cropped up between the two girls and himself, ever since he had brought home their dying father. On the day after the funeral, he called to enquire after them. Then he came back to chat with them, and by degrees became so familiar and obliging that, one day, he took the spade out of Lise's hands and finished turning up the patch for her. From that time, out of friendship, he devoted to them all the time which

was not occupied by his labour on the farm. He was one of the house, of the old ancestral house of the Fouans, built three centuries ago, and honoured by the family with a sort of religious respect. When Mouche, in his life-time, had complained of having received the worst lot in the division, and accused his brother and sister of having robbed him, they used to reply:

"But the house! Haven't you got the house with it?"

A poor, tumble-down house, which had settled down, and was shaky and full of crevices, patched up from end to end with scraps of wood and mortar. It must have been originally constructed of mud and rubble; then later on two walls had been rebuilt of mortar; and finally, about the beginning of the century, they had decided to replace the thatch by a roof of small tiles, which by this time were rotten. So it had gone on, and still lasted, three feet lower than the road; in old times they were all constructed so, doubtless for the sake of greater warmth. The disadvantage of it was that in stormy weather the water invaded it, and there was always mud in the corners. But withal it was most cunningly situated, with its back to wide Beauce on the north, whence the fierce gales of winter blew; on that side there was only a narrow sky-light protected by a shutter, in the kitchen level with the street; whilst on the other side, which faced south, there were the doors and windows. It might have been one of those fishermen's cabins, on the ocean shore, in which there is not so much as a chink that looks on the sea. From their continual onslaughts the winds of La Beauce had given it a list forward; it stooped, it was like those very ancient women whose backs have given way.

And Jean was soon acquainted with every corner of it. He helped to clean up the dead man's room, the nook taken out of the granary, from which it was simply divided by a partition-wall of planks. There was nothing in it but an old chest full of straw, which served for a bed, one chair, and a table. Downstairs his intimacy ended with the kitchen; he refrained from following the two sisters into their bedroom; but through the door, which

was always left ajar, he caught a glimpse of the recess with its two beds, the big walnut wardrobe, and a round table, carved magnificently—no doubt a relic of the Château, stolen long ago. Behind that there was another room, but it was so damp that the father had preferred to sleep upstairs: they were sorry that they had even stored potatoes there, for they promptly began to sprout. It was in the kitchen that they lived, in that huge, smoke-begrimed apartment, in which for three hundred years generations of Fouans had succeeded each other. It was odorous of long labour for a scanty pittance—the unceasing struggle of a race which had never got beyond the point of just not dying of hunger, which wore itself out with hardship, and yet was never richer by a halfpenny in December than in January. A door opening right into the shed made the cows part of the company; and when this door was shut an eye could still be kept on them through a pane of glass that was let into the wall. Beyond that there was the stable, which Gédéon now had to himself; next to that a loft and a wood-shed, built in such a manner that it was not necessary to go out of doors—you went from one into the other. Outside, the pond—the only water for the animals and for the garden—was maintained by the rainfall. Every morning they were obliged to go down to the spring in the road below to fetch their drinking-water. Jean liked being there, without troubling to ask himself the motive of his visits. Lise, with gaiety written in every line of her plump person, made him fully welcome.

Nevertheless, her five-and-twenty years had aged her already; she had grown ugly, especially since her confinement. But with her big, strong arms she brought such a fund of good-nature to her work, tramping about, shouting and laughing, that it was a pleasure to look at her. Jean treated her like a woman, addressing her as "you," whilst on the other hand, he continued to use the familiar "thou" to Françoise, whose fifteen years made her but a child to him. The latter, whom hard work and the open air had not yet had time to disfigure, retained her pretty, long face, with its little obstinate forehead, its black and silent eyes,

its thick mouth shaded already by a faint down; and child as one would have thought her, she was a woman too, and it wouldn't have taken too much tickling, as her sister remarked, to plant a child in her.

Lise had brought her up since the death of their mother; that was the origin of their extreme attachment, active and ardent on the side of the elder, passionate and restrained with the younger. Little Françoise was celebrated for her stubborn head. Injustice exasperated her. When she had once said, "That's mine, and that's yours," she would not have budged an inch at the point of the knife. If she worshipped Lise, moreover, it was from a notion that she owed her this adoration. For the rest she was amenable enough; well-behaved and clean-minded, only troubled by her precocious growth, which rendered her languid, somewhat a glutton, and indolent. After a time she also took to addressing Jean as "thou," looking upon him as a good-natured, very elderly friend, who played with her and sometimes teased her, lying deliberately, and standing up for injustice, in order that he might have the amusement of seeing her choke with passion.

One Sunday, on a June afternoon, though it was already broiling hot, Lise was at work in the kitchen-garden, hoeing the peas; she had placed Jules under a plum tree and he had gone to sleep. The sun beat down upon her from exactly overhead, and she was puffing as she bent over double to pluck out the weeds, when a voice came over the hedge:

"Hullo! not resting, then, even on Sunday!"

She recognized the voice, and jumped up, her arms and face scarlet from the influx of blood to them, but laughing nevertheless.

"Gracious! Sunday as well as any other day; the work won't get done of itself!"

It was Jean. He walked past the hedge and came in through the courtyard.

"Let it bide now. I've come to hurry it up—your work."

But she refused, she would soon be done; besides, if she didn't

do that she would have something else to do, one couldn't kick one's heels! In spite of being out of bed at four o'clock, and being still sewing in the evening by candle-light, she never got to the end of it.

Not to contradict her, he stretched himself in the shade of the neighbouring plum tree, taking care not to sit down upon Jules. He watched her, bent double again, her buttocks in the air, puckering up her petticoats, which were raised, till they exposed her big legs; whilst with her head close to the ground, she worked away with her arms, without being afraid of a stroke from the rush of blood which swelled the veins of her neck.

"It's lucky," said he, "that you're built so strong."

She showed a certain pride at this, gave a complacent laugh. And he laughed too, admiring her with an air of conviction, thinking her strong and brave, like a man. And the sight of this crupper in the air, these straining calves, this woman on all fours, with the sweat and odour of an excited animal, moved him with no ignoble desires. He thought merely how with limbs like that the work was got through! Surely enough, when she married, a woman of that build would be as good as her husband. It was, doubtless, through the association of ideas, that he went on to drop involuntarily a piece of news which he had promised himself to keep secret.

"I saw Buteau the day before yesterday."

Lise rose to her feet slowly. But she had no time to question him. Françoise, hearing Jean's voice, had come in from the dairy, behind the cow-shed, her arms were bare and dripping white with milk; she burst out angrily:

"You've seen him. . . . Ah, the blackguard!"

It was a growing antipathy; she could not hear her cousin's name without being carried away by one of her revolts of virtue, as though she had a personal injury to avenge.

"He's a blackguard, to be sure," declared Lise, calmly, "but it doesn't mend matters much to say so, at this time of day."

She had stuck her arms akimbo, and now she asked gravely:

"Well, and what did Buteau have to say?"

"Nothing," answered Jean awkwardly, feeling vexed at having let his tongue wag. "We talked of his affairs, because his father is telling everybody that he'll disinherit him. And he says that he has time enough to wait, and the old man's strong enough still, and that, anyhow, he's damned if he cares."

"Does he know that Jesus Christ and Fanny have signed the deed all the same, and each has taken possession of his share?"

"Yes, he knows it, and he knows, too, that Daddy Fouan has leased to Delhomme the share that he, Buteau, wouldn't take. He knows that Monsieur Baillehache is furious, and has sworn that he'll never allow the lots to be drawn again, until the papers have been signed. . . . Yes, yes, he knows it's all over."

"Ah, and he doesn't say anything?"

"No, he says nothing."

Lise silently bent down and went a few paces, rooting up the weeds; the only part of her visible was the protruding rotundity of her posterior. Then she turned her neck round, her head still lowered:

"Do you know what it is, Corporal? Well—it's this—I've got to keep Jules and cry quits."

Jean, who hitherto had encouraged her to hope, moved his chin:

"Faith! I believe you're right."

And he cast a glance toward Jules, whom he had forgotten. The infant rolled up in its long clothes was still asleep, its little face motionless, in a flood of sunshine. There was the rub—the child! Otherwise why shouldn't he have married Lise, since she was free? The idea had come to him in a flash, while he was watching her work. Maybe he was in love with her, and it was merely for the pleasure of seeing her that he came to the house. Yet he remained astonished at it, never having felt any desire for her, never having even played with her as he played, for instance, with Françoise. And just then, raising his head, he perceived the latter, standing very stiff and angry in the sun,

with her eyes so comically bright with anger that he could not but be amused at her, perplexed as he was by his discovery. But the sound of a cornet, a strange tootling summons was heard, and Lise left her peas, and cried:

"Why, there's Lambordieu! . . . I've got to order a cap of him."

On the other side of the hedge a little, short man hove in sight along the road, blowing a horn, and walking in front of a large, long cart pulled by a gray horse. It was Lambordieu, a big shopkeeper of Cloyes, who had gradually added to his trade of draper that of milliner, haberdasher, shoemaker, and even of ironmonger. It was a regular bazaar which he trotted round from village to village within a radius of five or six leagues. The peasants had come at last to buy everything of him—from their saucepans to their Sunday coats. His cart would open and shut, and it displayed rows and rows of drawers with a frontage like a real shop.

When Lambordieu had got the order for a cap, he added: "And in the meantime wouldn't you like some fine silk handkerchiefs?" He undid the cardboard case, and shook out in the sunshine some red silk handkerchiefs with gold palms gleaming on them.

"There! three francs—it's giving 'em away. Five francs for the two."

Lise and Françoise, who had taken them across the hawthorn hedge on which Jules' baby-clothes were drying, handled them with envious eyes. But they were sensible girls; they had no need for them; what was the good of spending money? And they were giving them back, when Jean resolved suddenly that he would marry Lise, in spite of the child. Then to bring matters to a crisis, he called out:

"No, no, keep it; it's my treat. You won't pain me by refusing; it's just to show my good-will to you."

He had said nothing to Françoise, and as she was still holding out her handkerchief to the salesman, he noticed her, and he felt

a thrill of pain when he fancied that she had grown paler, that her lips quivered.

"You, too, silly! Keep it . . . don't make a wry face about it."

The two sisters protested, held out for a little, laughing. Already Lambordieu had put his hand over the hedge to pocket the five francs. And he started again, the horse dragging the long cart behind him, the harsh notes of the trumpet were lost in the windings of the road.

Jean had an idea of bringing things to a head with Lise at once by declaring himself. But an accident prevented him. The stable had not been properly shut, and suddenly they caught sight of the donkey, Gédéon, in the middle of the kitchen garden, lustily munching some carrot-tops. This donkey, a big, sturdy animal, with a reddish brown coat and a great gray cross on his back, was a mischievous creature, full of cunning; he was capable of lifting the latch with his mouth, and coming in to take some bread out of the kitchen; while from the manner in which he moved his long ears when he was rebuked for his vices, it was easy to see that he understood. As soon as he saw that he was detected, he assumed an expression of bland indifference, then at a threatening word, a gesture of pursuit, he ran off. But instead of returning to the courtyard, he trotted down the narrow paths to the end of the garden. Then there was a regular chase, and when Françoise had succeeded in catching him, he pulled himself together, planted his neck and fore-legs stubbornly, so as to make himself heavier, and get along more slowly. Nothing did any good, neither kicks nor kindness. It was necessary for Jean to interfere, and jostle him from behind with his man's arms; for ever since he had been the property of two women, Gédéon had developed the most profound contempt for them. Jules woke up at the noise and howled. The opportunity was lost; the young man had to go away that day without having spoken.

A week passed; a great timidity had come over Jean, and now

he had no longer the courage. It was not that the arrangement seemed to him a bad one; on the contrary, with reflection, he was more sensible of its advantages. On his side, as on hers, there was everything to be gained by it. If he had no property, she was embarrassed with her baby: that equalized things; and he was not influenced by any base calculations; it was as much for her happiness as for his own. Then his marriage, by making it incumbent on him to leave the farm, would disentangle him from Jacqueline, with whom he had again taken up, out of a sneaking regard for the pleasure she gave. So that his mind was made up, and he waited for an opportunity to declare himself, while he sought for the right words to say, for he was a man whose sheepishness where women were concerned even the army had not cured.

One day, at last, about four o'clock, Jean got away from the farm, determined to speak. It was an hour when Françoise would be taking the cows for their evening pasture, and he had chosen it in order to be alone with Lise. But at the outset he was alarmed by a misadventure. La Frimat had come in, like the obliging neighbour she was, and was just then helping the young woman to wring out the washing in the kitchen. The evening before, the two sisters had put it in to soak. Since the morning the leaden-coloured water, perfumed with iris roots, had been boiling in a caldron, which was fastened to a stand over a clear fire of poplar logs. And with her arms bared and her petticoats tucked up Lise, armed with a pot of yellow earth, was drawing out of this water and sprinkling the linen with which the vessel was full. At the bottom sheets, then dish-cloths and shifts, and at the top still more sheets. La Frimat was not of very much use, but she talked away and contented herself with lifting every five minutes and emptying into the caldron the pail which was placed underneath the vessel to receive the constant drippings of the wash. Jean drew upon his patience, hoping that she would go. But she stayed on, talking of her poor man, the paralytic, who could no longer move a hand. It was a great

affliction. They had never been rich, only whilst he was still able to work he used to hire some land and make it pay, whereas now she found it hard enough all alone to cultivate the one acre which belonged to them; and she killed herself over that, picked up dung off the roads to manure it, as she had no live-stock now, looked after her lettuces, her beans, her peas, till she could have counted the plants, watered even her three plum trees and the two apricots, and finally made a considerable profit out of this same acre. Every Saturday she went into market at Cloyes, bent down by the weight of two huge baskets, not to mention the big vegetables, which a neighbour carried for her in his cart. She rarely came home without two or three five-franc pieces, especially during the fruit season. Her constant lamentation was over the scarcity of manure; neither her collection of dung nor the sweepings of a few rabbits and fowls that she reared sufficed for her. So that she had come to use that which her old man and herself made—the despised manure of humanity, which even in the country excites disgust. People had got to know this, and chaffed her about it, calling her Old Mother Gaga, and the nickname was detrimental to her at market. Tradesmen's wives turned away from her carrots and her splendid cabbages with a sick feeling of disgust. In spite of her extreme amiability she could not get over this.

"Come, now, Corporal, what do *you* think? Is it in reason? . . . Aren't we meant to make some use of everything the good Lord has given us? And I'm sure beasts' dung isn't any nicer. No, it's just their jealousy; they've got a grudge against me at Roques because my vegetables are finer than theirs. Now, Corporal, you're not disgusted by it, are you? "

Jean answered with some embarrassment:

"Lord! I can't say it's particularly tempting. I'm not used to it, you see. I daresay it's only fancy."

His frankness distressed the old woman. In spite of her good-nature, she could not restrain her bitterness.

"I see; they've set you against me already. Ah! if you knew how wicked folks are, if you could guess all they say about you! . . ."

And she came out with all the scandal of Roques about the young man. At the outset they had hated him because he was a mechanic, because he sawed and planed wood instead of tilling the earth. Then, when he had taken to the plough, he was accused of coming to a district foreign to him, to take the bread out of other people's mouths. Who knew what his antecedents were? No doubt he had done some dirty trick at home, so that he dared not show his face there. And they pryed into his relations with La Cognette, and said that the two of them would give old Hourdequin a night-cap one night and rob him.

"Oh, the vermin!" murmured Jean, white with anger.

Lise, who was wringing a parcel of her steaming linen into the copper, began to laugh at the name of La Cognette, which she brought up herself sometimes, when she wished to tease him.

"And since I've begun, I'd better go on to the end," continued La Frimat. "Why, there's nothing too shocking for them to say, since you've taken to coming here. . . . Last week—wasn't it?—you gave each of them a handkerchief; we saw them on Sunday, at Mass. It's too disgusting; they swear that you sleep with both of them."

Suddenly, trembling but resolved, Jean rose and said:

"Listen, mother! I'll answer before you; that doesn't bother me. . . . Yes, I'm going to ask Lise if she'll marry me. You understand, Lise? I ask for you, and if you say yes, you will make me very happy."

She was just emptying the pot into the washing-tub. But she did not hurry herself, went on carefully sprinkling the clothes; then, with her bare arms all steaming, she looked him in the face, with a sudden gravity.

"So it's serious?"

"Very serious."

She did not exhibit any surprise. It was natural enough. Only she said neither "yes" nor "no." No doubt she had some idea which troubled her.

"You mustn't refuse me, because of La Cognette," he went on. "La Cognette, you know——"

She interrupted him with a gesture, she was quite aware that that was of no consequence, the foolery at the farm.

"Of course there's this to add: I have nought beyond my carcase to bring you, and you have the house and the land."

Again she made a gesture, as if to say that in her position, hampered with a child, she thought as he did, that their drawbacks counterbalanced each other.

"No, no; that's not all," she declared at last. "Only, there is Buteau! But since he won't do anything."

"Very true, and there's no question of friendship—he has behaved too bad. But all the same Buteau must be consulted."

Jean reflected for a long minute. Then, sensibly:

"Just as you like. . . . It's his due, I suppose, for the child's sake."

And La Frimat, who in her turn was gravely emptying the overflow pail into the caldron, thought it incumbent on her to approve the arrangement, and showed herself graciously disposed to Jean—he was an honest lad, she said, neither pig-headed nor brutal—when they heard outside Françoise coming back with the two cows.

"I say, Lise," she cried, "come and look here. La Coliche has smashed her foot."

They all went out, and Lise, when she saw the creature limping along with its left forefoot bruised and bloody, fell into a sudden passion—one of her old crusty fits, in which she used to hustle her sister about when the latter was little and had been naughty.

"Another piece of carelessness, ay? I suppose you fell asleep on the grass, like you did the other day."

"No, I am sure I didn't. I don't know how it can have hap-

pened. I fastened her to the stake—she must have caught her foot in the rope."

"Hold your tongue, little liar! One of these days you'll kill my cow for me."

Françoise's black eyes flashed fire. She was very pale, and she stammered rebelliously:

"Your cow—your cow. . . . You may as well say *our* cow."

"What, your cow? What do you want with a cow, child?"

"Yes, half of everything here is mine, and I've the right to take it, and throw it away too, if I like."

And the two sisters faced each other squarely, with threatening, hostile eyes. It was the first bitter quarrel their long attachment had known—engendered by the sharp sting of "mine" and "thine"; one was irritated at her younger sister's revolt, the other angered and roused to obstinacy by a sense of injustice. The elder gave way, and retreated to the kitchen lest she should be tempted to strike the child. And when the latter, having seen her cows to their shed, came in again and went to the bin to cut herself a slice of bread, there was a long silence.

Lise, however, had quieted down. The sight of her sister, stiff and sulky, began to render her uncomfortable. She was the first to speak; she tried to clear the air with a piece of unexpected news.

"There's something you don't know. Jean wants me to marry him; he has asked me."

Françoise, who was standing by the window while she ate, remained indifferent; she did not even turn her head.

"What has it got to do with me?"

"It's this to do with you: he would be your brother-in-law, and I want to know if you would like it."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Like it! What's the odds! Him or Buteau, so long as I haven't to sleep with them. . . . Only—shall I tell you what I think?—the whole business isn't very nice."

And she went out to finish her bread in the yard.

Jean, feeling uncomfortable, pretended to laugh, treating it as the whim of a spoilt child. La Frimat declared that in her young days they would have whipped such a little baggage till the blood came. As for Lise, she remained sombrely silent for a moment, apparently engrossed in her washing. Then she concluded:

"Well, let it stay like that, Corporal. I don't say 'no,' and I don't say 'yes.' The hay-making is just coming on, then I shall see my folk; I shall ask their advice and know what I'm in for. Then we will decide something. Will that do?"

"That will do."

He held out his hand and grasped hers, which she extended to him. Her whole person, bedewed with hot vapour, was redolent with an honest, housewifely odour—an odour of embers perfumed with iris.

CHAPTER IV

Since the previous evening, Jean had been working the mowing-machine through the few acres of meadow-land which joined La Borderie on the side of the Aigre. From dawn to night-fall the regular click of the knives had been heard, and this morning he was finishing, the last swathes were falling, and they made a track behind the wheels, a bed of fine grass of a cool green colour. As the farm did not possess a tossing-machine, they had let him take on two hay-makers, Palmyre, who wore herself out with work, and Françoise, who had enlisted for a whim, because the task amused her. Both of them had been there since five o'clock, and with their long forks they spread out the heaps of half-dried grass, which had been piled together on the previous evening, for protection from the night dews. The sun had risen in a cloudless, fiery sky, but a cooling breeze had sprung up. It was perfect weather for making good hay.

After breakfast, when Jean returned with his two hay-makers, the hay of the acre that had been cut first was made. He touched it, and found that it was dry and crisp.

"Come," he cried, "we will turn it over once more, and this evening we can begin the ricks."

Françoise, in a gray cotton dress, had tied a blue handkerchief round her head; one end of it covered her neck, whilst the two corners were passed loosely down her cheeks, protecting her face from the fury of the sun. Balancing her prong, she took the grass and flung it to the wind, which carried it off like a yellow dust. The stems fluttered about; a strong, penetrating scent exhaled from them—the scent of cut grass and of faded flowers. She grew very warm, as she moved in the midst of this continual shower which made her merry.

"Ah, little one," said Palmyre, in her sad voice, "one can see you're young. To-morrow you'll feel your arms."

But they were not by any means alone; all Rognes was cutting and tossing hay in the fields adjoining them. Before daybreak Delhomme had turned out, for the grass when it is soaked with dew is as soft to cut as new bread, whilst it becomes harder with every hour of sunshine. You could hear it now, resisting with a crackling sound the scythe, whose strokes came and went persistently, wielded by a multitude of bare arms. Nearer, adjoining the farm meadows, were two fields, one belonging to Macqueron, the other to Lengaigne. In the first, Berthe, clad like a young lady, in a flounced dress, with a straw hat on her head, had come with the hay-makers for the sake of a distraction; but, worn out already, she had come to a stand, leaning on her fork, under the shade of a willow. In the other, Victor, who was working for his father, had just sat down, and with an anvil between his knees was beating his scythe. For the last five minutes, in the great quivering silence which filled the air, no sound had been distinguishable except this obstinate hammering, the short, sharp strokes of the hammer upon the iron.

Just then Françoise found herself close to Berthe.

"Well—had enough of it?"

"A little—I'm beginning to. . . . When you're not used to a thing, you know!"

They talked together, spoke of Suzanne, Victor's sister, whom the Lengaignes had sent to a dressmaker's workshop at Châteaudun, and who had run away to Châtres after six months, to see life. It was said that she had eloped with a lawyer's clerk; all the girls of Roques were whispering the story, and adorning it with imaginary details. The life she was leading! Orgies of raspberry vinegar and soda, in the midst of a perfect stampede of men, who had her in turn in the back parlours of wine-shops.

"Yes, my dear, it's perfectly true. . . . Oh, she's a scorcher!"

Françoise, the younger of the two, opened her astonished eyes.

"That's one way of enjoying yourself," she said. "But if she doesn't come back, the Lengaignes will be all alone now Victor has been drawn for a soldier."

Berthe, who had inherited her father's rancour, shrugged her shoulders; a lot Lengaigne cared for that! All he regretted was that the girl hadn't stayed at home to be tumbled, and bring custom for his tobacco business. Why, an old fellow of forty, her own uncle, had her before she ever went to Châteaudun, one day when they were pulling up carrots together! And lowering her voice, Berthe described in crude language how the thing had happened. Françoise, bent double, choked with laughter, it struck her as so comical.

"Oh, dear, dear! how silly one must be to carry on so!"

She went back to her work, and moved farther on, lifting the grass with her prong, and scattering it in the sun. The noise of the hammer beating upon the iron made itself heard persistently. And a few minutes later, as she came near the young man sitting on the grass, she spoke to him.

"So you're off for a soldier?"

"Yes, in October. I've lots of time, there's no hurry."

She tried to conquer her desire to question him upon his sister, but brought up the subject in spite of herself.

"Is it true, what people say, that Suzanne is at Châtres?"

"I believe so. . . . As long as she's happy," he answered indifferently. Suddenly he went on, having caught sight of the schoolmaster, Lequeu, who seemed to have come there accidentally, in the course of an idle stroll. "Look—there's somebody after the Macqueron girl. . . . What did I tell you? He is stopping; he's shoved his face into her hair. . . . Get along, you, and your ugly clown's mug, you can smell it, but you'll get nothing else."

Françoise had begun to laugh, and Victor fell upon Berthe out of family hatred. No doubt, the schoolmaster wasn't much, a bad-tempered brute who struck the children, a sly fellow who never let anyone know what he thought, and was ready to fetch and carry for the daughter, for the sake of the father's cash. But Berthe, too, was no better than she should be, for all her town education and her fine ladyish airs. Oh yes, it was all very fine

to wear flounced dresses and velvet bodices, and to stick yourself out behind with handkerchiefs—it didn't make what was underneath any better. Quite the contrary, she was a knowing one; she had learnt more by being brought up in boarding-school at Cloyes than if she had stayed at home and looked after the cows. There was no danger of *her* being bothered with a baby; she was too fond of ruining her health by herself.

"What do you mean?" asked Françoise, who had not understood.

He made a gesture; she looked grave and said without embarrassment:

"*That* accounts for her always talking such filth, and trying to pull you about!"

Victor had started beating his iron again. Then in the midst of the noise, he gave a merry wink, hammering between each sentence:

"Besides, you know, Miss 'Got-none——'"

"What's that?"

"Berthe, of course. 'Got-none.' It's a nickname the lads give her because she doesn't grow them."

"Grow what?"

"Hairs—you know—where they should be!"

"Get along with you, story-teller!"

"I tell you it is."

"You've seen, then?"

"If I haven't, others have."

"What others?"

"Lads who've sworn it is so, to lads I know."

"I expect they went and spied at her."

"Well, never mind how! I tell you it's horrid, hideous, as naked as they make them. Think of the ugliest of those ugly little sparrows without any feathers, that open their beaks wide in the nest. Oh, hideous, I tell you!"

Françoise was suddenly seized with a fresh attack of laughter; the notion of this sparrow without a feather to it struck her as

so droll. And she did not calm down nor resume her haymaking until she caught sight of her sister Lise on the road above coming down to the meadow. The latter came up to Jean, and explained that she was on her way to see her uncle about Buteau. For three days this expedition had been planned, and she had promised to call on her way back and give him her answer. When she went off again, Victor was still hammering; Françoise, Palmyre, and the other women were still tossing up the hay beneath the dazzling expanse of cloudless sky; whilst Lequeu was obligingly giving Berthe a lesson—thrusting out the prong, raising it and lowering it, with the stiffness of a soldier on parade. In the distance the mowers advanced continually, with a uniform rhythmical motion, their bodies swaying from the waist upwards as they thrust out and brought home their scythes unceasingly. For a moment Delhomme paused, and stood tall and erect in the midst of the others. A cow's horn, full of water, hung in its sheath from his belt. He took out the black whetstone and sharpened his scythe with a long rapid motion. Then he bent his back again, and the sharpened steel swallowed up the meadow with an accentuated hissing sound. Lise had arrived in front of the Fouans' house. At first she was afraid there was no one in, the place seemed so silent. Rose had got rid of her two cows, the old man had just sold the horse; there were neither animals nor work, nor any stir of life in the deserted house and yard. However, the door gave at her push, and Lise, passing into the parlour, which was dark and silent in spite of the brilliancy out of doors, found old Fouan up and eating a piece of bread and cheese, whilst his wife sat and watched him in idleness.

"Good-day to you, aunt! . . . And is everything going as it should with you?"

"Eh, yes!" answered the old woman, whose face had brightened as though the visit pleased her. "Now, that we're gentlefolks, it's nothing but do as we please from morning to night."

Lise tried to make herself pleasant to her uncle also.

"And your appetite is all right, I see?"

"Oh," he said, "it's not that I'm hungry. Only it always fills up the time to have a bite. It helps to get through the day."

He had such a mournful expression that Rose started off to expatiate on their happiness at having no more work to do. Truly they had earned it, too; it was quite time for them to sit down and watch other folk's drudgery, while they lived on their income. To get up late, and twiddle one's thumbs, not to care whether it was hot or cold, to have never a care in the world—ah, it made a heap of difference; it was like going to Paradise. The old man, himself, woke up, caught her excitement, and surpassed her eulogies. But beneath their forced joy, the fever of their speech, a profound weariness was discernible; their leisure was a punishment and a torment to the old people, who, since their arms had grown suddenly feeble, maddened themselves with idleness, seeming like some worn-out machinery that had been thrown away as old iron.

At last Lise plucked up courage to mention the cause of her visit.

"Uncle, I heard the other day that you had seen Buteau. . . ."

"Buteau is a bloddy sod," cried Fouan, in a sudden access of rage, without giving her time to finish. "If he hadn't been as obstinate as a mule, I should never have had this bother with Fanny."

It was the first disagreement between his children and himself which he had kept secret; the bitter feeling which it had aroused in him he had only just revealed. When he entrusted Delhomme with Buteau's portion, he had meant to let it to him, at eighty francs the hectare, whereas Delhomme intended merely to pay him a double annuity—two hundred francs for his own share, and two hundred for the other. That was fair; but the old man was furious at finding himself in the wrong.

"What bother!" asked Lise. "Don't the Delhommes pay you?"

"Oh, yes!" answered Rose. "Every quarter, at the stroke of

twelve; it's money down on the table. . . . Only, there are different ways of paying, aren't there? and the father is sensitive, and would like at least politeness. Fanny comes here looking as though we were brokers, as if we had robbed her."

"Yes," the old man added, "they pay us, and that's all. For my part, I don't think that's enough. They ought to show us some consideration. Does their money wipe out the score between us? We are creditors, nothing more. . . . All the same I've no right to complain. . . . If only they all paid us."

He broke off, and an embarrassed silence prevailed. That allusion to Jesus Christ, who had not paid them a halfpenny, but mortgaged his share bit by bit, and drank the proceeds, distressed the mother, who always wanted to defend the scamp, the darling of her heart. She was in terror, lest he should expatiate on this sore point, and hastened to take him up.

"Now, don't fret over trifles! Aren't we happy, and what's the rest matter to you? Enough is as good as a feast."

She had never stood up to him so before. He looked at her fixedly.

"You talk too much, mother. . . . I may be happy enough, but I won't be made a fool of."

She shrank back, huddled herself up sluggishly in her chair, whilst he ate up his bread, taking a long time to chew the last mouthful in order to prolong the distraction. The gloomy parlour was infected with drowsiness.

"Well," Lise continued, "I want to know what Buteau means to do about me and his child. I've never bothered him, it's time the thing was settled."

Neither of the two old people uttered a word. She questioned the father directly.

"Since you've seen him, he must have spoken of me. What does he say? "

"Nothing; he didn't so much as open his mouth about it. And faith! what is there to say? The curé plagues the life out of me

to make me bring it about, as if I could bring it about when the lad won't take his share."

Lise reflected, full of uncertainty.

"Do you think he will accept it, one of these days?"

"May be!"

"You think he would marry me, then?"

"It's just a chance."

"Do you advise me to wait, then?"

"Lord! that's according as you feel inclined. Everybody must act as they think best."

She was silent; she did not wish to mention Jean's proposal, not knowing by what means she could obtain a definite answer.

Then she made a last effort:

"Understand, I'm about tired of it now. I must have a yes, or no. . . . You, uncle! if you were to go to Buteau—oh, please!"

Fouan shrugged his shoulders.

"To begin with, I'll never speak to the sod again. And then, my girl, you're flat. What! do you want to make the pig-headed fool say no, so that he'll go on saying 'no'? Leave him free to say 'yes' some day if it's ever worth his while."

"That's so, sure enough," concluded Rose simply, becoming once more the echo of her husband.

And Lise could extract nothing more definite from them. She shut the door upon the parlour, which resumed its state of torpor; and the house once more seemed as though deserted.

In the fields, by the side of the Aigre, Jean and his two hay-makers had begun the first rick. Françoise was at the top. In the middle, planted on a swathe, she disposed and arranged all around her the bundles of hay which the young man and Palmyre handed to her. And gradually it grew larger, increased in height, while she, always in the centre, thrust the trusses down beneath her feet, in the hollow which she occupied, as the rampart round her began to top her knees. The rick became less shapeless. It was already over six feet in height; Palmyre and Jean had to

lift their prongs high in the air; and the work proceeded to an accompaniment of frank laughter, because of the delight of the open air, and the jokes that were flying about, and the sweet scent of the hay.

Françoise, especially, with her kerchief slid from off her chignon, her head bare to the sun, her hair loose and covered with grass, was as merry as a grig upon her moving hillock in which she was plunged as deep as her thighs. Her bare arms were buried, every truss they threw to her sprinkled her with a shower of sprigs; she dropped out of sight, pretending to be drowning in the eddy.

"Oh, la-la! that pricked me!"

"Where?"

"High up, under my clothes."

"It's a spider, catch hold of it—stick your legs together."

And the merriment increased, and there was a flood of ribald jokes, until they split their sides with laughter.

Delhomme, in the distance, was disturbed by them, and he turned his head for a moment, without ceasing to ply his scythe. The child! she ought to know what work was like, real work—if she could play like that. Nowadays girls were spoiled, they only worked when they found it amusing. And he went on, laying low the swathes with regular strokes, leaving a wake behind him of shorn land. The sun was sinking on the horizon, the mowers extended their breaches. Victor had finished hammering his scythe, but he was in no hurry to resume; and as Slutty passed with her geese, he made off surreptitiously, and caught her up as she reached a thick growth of willows which fringed the river.

"Good!" Jean cried, "he is going to grind something else! There's the grindstone waiting for him."

Françoise burst into fresh laughter at this allusion.

"He's too old for her."

"Too old! . . . Only listen, if they're not grinding together."

And, blowing through his lips, he imitated the sound of a stone filing down the edge of a blade so exactly that even Palmyre had to hold her sides, as if she had been seized with colic.

"What's the matter with Jean to-day," she said. "Ain't he saucy? "

The batches of hay were being thrown up higher every time; and the rick was still growing.

They mocked at Lequeu and Berthe, who had ended by sitting on the grass. Perhaps "Got-none" liked being tickled from a distance with a straw; all the same, if the schoolmaster put the cake in the oven, it wasn't for him that it was baked.

"Ain't he dirty? " repeated Palmyre, who was not used to laughing, and had half choked herself.

Then Jean began to tease her.

"Oh, yes! I suppose you've got to two-and-thirty without having ever seen the other side of the fig-leaf."

"Me—never! "

"What? Have you never been had by a lad? Never had any lovers? "

"No, no! "

She had become suddenly pale and serious, with her long, distressed face, already worn and sunken, in which the eyes were hardly human, but dumbly profound and devoted like an honest dog's. Perhaps she was recasting her miserable life, without friendship or love in it—the life of a beast of burden driven at the whip's end, to fall into a sleep like death in its stable when the day is done. And she came to a stop, standing up, with the prong in her hands, looking out into the distance at the countryside which she had never even seen. There was a silence. Françoise listened from the top of the rick without stirring, whilst Jean, who was beginning to puff also, went on with his fun, hesitating whether to drop something that was on the tip of his tongue. Then he made up his mind to blurt out everything.

"Is it a lie what folk say, that you sleep with your brother? "

Palmyre's face from being very pale turned to scarlet with

a sudden rush of blood, which brought back her youth. She stammered betwixt her surprise and her irritation, for the flat denial which she would have liked.

"Oh, the wicked people . . . who could believe such a thing. . . ."

Françoise and Jean, seized with a fresh attack of merriment, both spoke at once, pressing her and increasing her confusion. Why, gracious! in the shed where they lived, her brother and she, they had hardly room to move without jostling each other. Their mattresses joined each other on the floor; for sure they made a mistake sometimes—in the dark.

"Now, it's true, admit it's true! . . . Besides, everybody knows it is."

Palmyre, drawing herself up, in her confusion began to declaim bitterly.

"And suppose it were true? What business is it of yours? I'm his sister. I might as well be his wife, since all the girls run away from him."

Two tears rolled down her cheeks at this avowal, wounded in her maternal tenderness for the idiot, which she carried to the point of committing incest. After earning the bread he ate, she could still in the evening give him that which the others denied him, a feast which cost them nothing; and if they had searched their minds, grown dim from their nearness to the soil, these pariahs, whom love had rejected, could not have told how the thing had come to pass. It was an instinctive attraction, without any consent of the reason; he tortured and bestial, she passive and good for anything—both of them seduced by the mere pleasure of being a little warmer in this hovel in which they shivered.

"She's right; what business is it of ours?" Jean resumed, with his good-natured air, touched at seeing her so upset. "It's their own concern—it does no harm to anybody."

Something else, moreover, occurred to distract their attention. Jesus Christ had come down from the château, the old cellar

where he dwelt, in the midst of the brushwood, halfway up the hill. And from the end of the road he was calling to Slutty at the top of his voice, swearing and bellowing out that his bitch of a daughter had again disappeared for a couple of hours, without a thought to the evening soup.

"Your daughter," cried Jean, "she is under the willows stargazing with Victor."

Jesus Christ lifted his two hands to heaven.

"'Sdeath! Is the baggage dishonouring me? . . . I'll go and fetch my whip."

And he went up again, running. It was a huge waggoner's whip that he hung behind his door on the left for use on these occasions. But Slutty must have heard him. There was a rustling noise, the sound of flight behind the leaves; and two minutes later Victor strolled up nonchalantly. He cast an eye at his scythe, and then resumed his work. And when Jean from the distance called out to ask him whether he had got the gripes, he replied:

"You've hit it."

The rick was just finished. Palmyre threw up the last few trusses with her long skinny arms, and Françoise on the summit seemed to have gained in stature, as she stood against the background of pale sky, in the sombre light of the setting sun. She was quite out of breath, panting from her exertions, drenched in sweat, her hair sticking to her head, and so disordered that her bodice gaped upon her little firm breast, and her petticoat, the fastenings having come undone, was slipping off her.

"Oh, my! ain't it a height? My head's quite dizzy."

She gave a shuddering laugh, hesitating, not daring to get down again. She put one foot over, and then withdrew it quickly.

"No, it's too high. Go and fetch a ladder."

"You silly," said Jean, "why don't you sit down and let yourself slide?"

"No, no! I'm afraid; I can't!"

Then there were exclamations, and scolding, and broad jokes.

She mustn't come on her stomach or it might make it swell! On her backside then, unless she'd got any—chilblains! And Jean, from below, grew excited with his eyes on the girl, whose legs he could discern. Little by little he became exasperated at the sight of her so high up beyond his reach, was seized unconsciously with his manhood's need to catch her and hold her tight.

"I tell you, you won't break any bones! Jump off, you'll fall into my arms!"

"No, no."

He was standing in front of the rick, and he opened his arms wide, offering his breast for her to fall upon. And when she made up her mind, shut her eyes, and let herself go, her descent was so rapid down the smooth incline of hay, that she knocked him over, and fell with her two legs straddle-ways across his chest. On the ground, with her clothes all disordered, she choked with laughter, as she gasped out that she had not hurt herself a bit. But when he felt her, warm and perspiring against his face, he had drawn her close to him. The penetrating odour of girlhood, the heavy smell of the hay blown about in the fresh air, intoxicated him, stiffened all his muscles with a sudden access of desire. And beyond, there was something else, a passion for this child, of which hitherto he had been ignorant, and which had suddenly convulsed him, an attraction of the heart and the flesh, dating far back, which had grown up with their games and their frank laughter, to culminate in this immense longing to possess her, here and now, in the grass.

"Oh, Jean! give over, you're hurting me."

She laughed still, thinking that he was in play. And he, meeting the rounded eyes of Palmyre, shuddered, and got upon his feet again; shivering, with the vacant look of a drunkard who has been suddenly sobered by the sight of some yawning chasm. What? It was not Lise whom he wanted, but this little girl! His heart had never beaten a jot faster at the touch of Lise's skin against his own; but how swiftly his blood coursed at the mere thought of kissing Françoise. Now he knew why he

found so much pleasure in visiting the two sisters, and making himself useful to them. But the child was so young! He stood confounded at it and full of shame.

Just then, Lise returned from the Fouans. On the way she had reflected. She would have preferred Buteau, because, after all, he was the father of her child. The old folks were right, what was the good of putting one's self out? Upon the day on which Buteau should say "no," there would still be Jean, who would say "yes." She came up to the latter, and suddenly:

"I've no answer. Uncle knows nothing. Let us wait."

Disturbed, and shivering still, Jean looked at her without understanding. Then he remembered the marriage, the kid, Buteau's consent, the whole business, which two hours before had seemed so advantageous for her and for himself. He hastened to say:

"Yes, yes, let us wait; that's the best."

Night was falling, a star gleamed already, far back in the violet-coloured sky. In the growing darkness, only the vague outlines of the nearest ricks were visible, making little bosses upon the flat extent of meadows. But the odours from the heated earth grew more penetrating in the quietude of the air, and the noises were more audible, and were prolonged with a musical lucidity. Voices of men and women, laughter dying away, the lowing of cattle, the clash of a tool! Whilst, collected into one corner of a field, the mowers still moved along unceasingly; and the hissing of the scythes still mounted upwards, with a regular intonation from the labour which it was no longer possible to see.

CHAPTER V

Two years passed in the active and monotonous life of the rural districts; and Roques, with the inevitable return of the seasons, had lived through the eternal succession of things—the same labours, the same sleep. On the road below the village there was a fountain of fresh water, hard by the school, and here all the women used to come down to fetch their drinking-water, the houses only possessing ponds which served to water their cattle and their gardens. At six o'clock in the evening, a sort of news-office for the district was held, the smallest event found an echo here, and people indulged in endless comments on such-and-such folk, who had been eating meat, on so-and-so's daughter who had been in the family-way since Candlemas; and during these two years the same gossip had been evolved with the seasons—a monotonous repetition of children who had come too soon, of drunken husbands, and beaten wives, much toil and much wretchedness. So many things had happened, and—nothing at all!

The Fouans, whose assignment of their property had caused such excitement, dragged on their lives so drowsily that people had forgotten them. The matter had stopped there: Buteau continued to be obstinate, and he had not yet married the elder of Mouche's daughters, who was bringing up his brat. It was the same with Jean, whom people had accused of being intimate with Lise: there might be nothing between them; but why, then, did he continue to be so constantly at the two sisters' house? It looked suspicious. And the hour by the fountain would have languished often had it not been for the rivalry of Cœlina Macqueron and Flore Lengaigne, whom La Bécu set at each other's throats, under the pretext of trying to reconcile them. Then, when things were at their quietest, two important events burst upon them: the ap-

proach of the elections, and the question of the great road between Rognes and Châteaudun; these stirred up a furious wind of gossip. The overflowing pitchers were set down in a row, the women seemed to have taken up their abode there. One Saturday evening they almost came to blows. It was on the morning after this, that M. de Chédeville, the outgoing member, lunched with Hourdequin at La Borderie. He was going on a round of canvasing, and had to consider the latter, an influential man with the peasants of his division—although he felt certain of being re-elected, thanks to his nomination as official candidate. He had once been to stay at Compiégne, all the country called him "the Emperor's friend," and that was amply sufficient: they elected him, as though he were in the habit of sleeping every night at the Tuileries. This M. de Chédeville, an old buck, the flower of the reign of Louis Philippe, cherished Orléanist tendencies in his heart. He had ruined himself over women, and had nothing now but his farm of La Chamade, over by Orgères, where he never set foot except at election time, disgusted at the diminishing value of his rent-roll, and seized tardily with the practical notion of repairing his fortune in trade. Tall, and elegant still with his padded figure and dyed hair, he was wide-awake in a moment, in spite of the dying fire of his eyes, at the least flutter of a petticoat. He was preparing, he said, an important speech on agricultural questions.

The night before, Hourdequin had had a furious quarrel with Jacqueline, who wanted to be present at lunch.

"Your member! your member! Do you think I should eat him? So you're ashamed of me!"

But he held out; there were only two places laid, and she sulked, in spite of M. de Chédeville's air of gallantry. For he had caught a glimpse of her, and grasped the situation; and he was constantly turning his eyes towards the kitchen, where she had shut herself in with her wounded pride. Lunch was drawing to a close; an omelette followed by a trout caught in the Aigre, and some roast pigeons.

"What is killing us," said M. de Chédeville, "is this freedom of trade that the Emperor is so set upon. No doubt things went well enough after the treaties of 1861:—people cried out that it was a miracle. But to-day the true effects are making themselves felt. Look how the price of everything has gone down. For my part, I am for Protection; we must have some defence against the foreigner."

Hourdequin, leaning back in his chair, having stopped eating, spoke slowly, with a vacant look in his eyes.

"Wheat which fetches eighteen francs the hectolitre, costs sixteen to produce. If it goes any lower it means ruin. . . . And every year, they say, America increases her exportations of cereals. We are threatened with an absolute swamping of the market. What will become of us then? Look here! I've always been on the side of progress, of science, of liberty. Well, here I am, going under, upon my word I am! Yes, sir! if they don't want us to die of hunger, let them give us Protection."

He took up his wing of pigeon again, then he continued:

"Do you know that your opponent, Monsieur Rochefontaine, the owner of the building-sheds at Châteaudun, is a desperate Free-trader?"

And they talked for a moment of this manufacturer, who employed twelve hundred men. He was a man of mark, intelligent, and energetic, very wealthy, moreover, and perfectly well-disposed towards the Empire; but irritated at being unable to obtain the support of the Préfet, he had persisted in setting up as an independent candidate. He had not the slightest chance; the country electorate treated him as a public enemy, once he was not on the influential side.

"Faith!" replied M. de Chédeville, "the fellow only cares about one thing—cheap bread, so that he can pay his workmen less."

The farmer, who was about to pour himself out a glass of Bordeaux, replaced the bottle on the table.

"This is the crux," he cried. "On the one side, here are we, the farmers, who must sell our grain at a remunerative price; on the other, the manufacturers, who force it down to lower wages. It's war to the knife between us, and I want to know how it's going to end?"

That, indeed, was the terrible problem of the day: the strife which was driving the social body to extinction. The question was considerably beyond the depths of the ancient buck, who contented himself with nodding his head and making a gesture of evasion.

Hourdequin filled his glass, and emptied it at a draught.

"There seems no end to it. . . . If the farmer gets a good price for his wheat, the artizan dies of hunger; if the artizan has anything to eat, it's the farmer who starves. . . . Well, what then? I see nothing. We must go on ravening on each other."

Then, with both elbows on the table, he gave vent to his feelings furiously; and his secret contempt for this landowner who did not farm, and knew nothing of the soil on which he lived, was apparent in a certain ironical vibration of his voice.

"You've asked me for facts for your speech. . . . Well, to begin with, it's your own fault if La Chamade spoils. Robiquet, your tenant there, leaves it to itself, because his lease is almost up, and he suspects you have an intention of raising it. You're never seen here; people laugh at you and rob you—nothing could be more natural. Besides, there's another, even simpler, explanation of your ruin: it is, that we are all of us ruined, La Beauce is worn out. Yes, fertile Beauce, our nurse, our mother!" He resumed: "For instance, in his youth Le Perche, on the other side of the Loire, was a poor district, sparsely cultivated, almost without wheat, whose inhabitants used to hire themselves out for harvest to Cloyes, to Châteaudun, to Bouqueval; and to-day, thanks to the continued rise in wages, Le Perche was flourishing and would soon be superior to La Beauce, not to mention the wealth it acquired by breeding and supplying all

the low country with horses, cattle, and pigs, through its markets at Mondubleau, Saint-Calais, and Courtalain. As for La Beauce, it depended entirely upon its sheep. Two years ago, when these had been decimated by the rot, it had passed through a terrible crisis, so much so that if the plague had continued it would not have survived. And he went on to describe the story of his own struggles, his thirty years of conflict with the soil, from which he had emerged a poorer man than before. He had always lacked capital; he had never been able to improve certain fields as he could have wished, only marl was very inexpensive, and nobody, except himself, made any use of it. It was the same with manures; people only used the manure off their farms, which was insufficient. All his neighbours scoffed at him because he tried chemical agents, which, indeed, were of such bad quality that their laughter was often justified. In spite of his ideas on the rotation of crops, he had been compelled to follow the custom of the country—a triennial rotation, without an interval of fallow, since artificial meadow-land, and the growth of weeded plants had become so universal. One piece of machinery alone, the threshing machine, was beginning to be generally accepted. There was the deadly, inevitable torpor of habit to contend against; and if he who was progressive and intelligent had been infected by it, what must it be with the small proprietors, with their thick heads and their hatred of novelty? A peasant would die of hunger sooner than take a handful of earth from his field and carry it for analysis to a chemist, who would tell him what it lacked or possessed in excess, the manure it required, the manner of cultivation necessary to make it succeed. For centuries the peasant took from the land and never thought of giving back to it; the only manure he knew of was that made by his horse and his two cows; and even that he dealt out grudgingly. Everything else went on at hap-hazard, the seed was thrown down, no matter in what soil, came up at hazard, or Heaven was cursed if it did not come up at all. If a day came when, having acquired some knowledge,

he should at last make up his mind to a reasonable system of cultivation, the crops would be doubled. Until that day, ignorant, pig-headed, never advancing so much as a hair's-breadth, he would continue to ruin the land. That was why La Beauce, once the granary of France, La Beauce so flat and unwatered, which depended solely on its wheat, would gradually die of exhaustion, weary of perpetual bleeding and of supporting a people of idiots.

"Ah, it's bloody well finished!" he cried, brutally. "Yes, our sons will live to see it—the earth bankrupt. . . . Are you aware that our peasantry, who of old saved every halfpenny to acquire a plot of ground which they had coveted for years, nowadays buy stocks and shares—Spanish, Portuguese, even Mexican? And they wouldn't risk a hundred francs in improving a single acre! They have lost confidence. The fathers stumble along in their groove like so many cattle; the sons and the daughters have only one dream—to leave their cows and shake off the plough to pour into the towns. And the worst is, that education, you know: the much talked-of education, which is to save everything, encourages this exodus, this depopulation of the country, by filling the children's heads with absurd vanity and a taste for an impossible prosperity. Look at Roques! They've a schoolmaster there, Lequeu, a beggar who has deserted the plough, and is eaten up with hatred of the land he should have been tilling. Well! how do you suppose he is to teach his pupils to love their condition when every day he treats them as little brutes and savages, and sends them off to the family dung-hill with a scholar's contempt? The remedy—good Lord!—the remedy would be to have different schools, practical teaching, and a graduated course of agriculture. There is a fact, Monsieur le Député, that I want to impress upon you. Insist upon that, above everything! There is salvation in such schools, perhaps, if it is not too late."

M. de Chédeville, bored and uneasy at this furious flood of facts, hastened to reply: "No doubt, no doubt." And when

the maid brought in dessert, a rich cheese and some fruit, leaving the door into the kitchen wide open, he caught sight of Jacqueline's pretty profile. He bent forward, blinked his eyes, moved about in order to attract the charming creature's attention. Then he resumed in his fluted voice, the voice of a man who had known what it was to make conquests:

"But you tell me nothing about the small holdings?"

He expressed the current notion: the small holdings created in '89, and encouraged by the laws, were directed to the regeneration of agriculture. Briefly, everyone must be a landowner, and each person was to expend his strength and his intelligence in cultivating his allotment.

"Don't talk to me about them!" declared Hourdequin.

"To begin with, small holdings existed before '89, and in almost as large a proportion. Besides, there is as much to be said against as for them."

Once more, his elbows on the table, eating cherries and cracking the kernels, he went into details. In Beauce, small holdings —that is to say, inheritances of less than twenty acres—were in the proportion of eighty per cent. For some time past, almost all the day-labourers, those who hired their services to the farms, had been buying allotments, fragments of large dismembered estates, which they cultivated in their spare time. No doubt that was excellent, for it attached the labourer to the soil. And one might add, in favour of small holdings, that they gave men more importance, more knowledge, greater self-respect. Then they produced more in proportion, and the result was of a better quality, since the owner's whole interest was at stake. But, on the other side, what disadvantages! To begin with, the superior result was due to a labour that was excessive: father, mother, children, killed themselves with toil. Then this parcelling out of land, by necessitating more cartage, wore out the roads, and increased the cost of production, without taking wasted time into account. As to the use of machinery, it seemed impossible; the allotments were too small. And they were, moreover, re-

sponsible for the need of a triennial rotation, which science must certainly proscribe, for it was illogical to expect two cereals in succession—wheat and oats. Briefly, unlimited allotments might so easily become a danger, that although, on the morrow of the Revolution, they had been legally privileged, through people's fear of the great estates being reconstructed, it was time now to pave the way for changes by restricting them.

"Listen;" he went on, "a struggle has commenced, and is growing keener, between large and small holdings. Some, like myself, are for the large, because they seem to tend to the spread of scientific and progressive ideas, to the more and more general use of machinery, and the employment of great capital. The others, on the contrary, believe only in individual effort, and cry up the small holdings, dreaming of some kind of farming in miniature, where each man produces his own manure, and looks after his quarter of an acre, picking out his seeds one by one, giving each the soil it wants, and raising each plant separately, under a glass case. Which of the two will win? Devil take me, if I have an idea! I'm quite aware, as I told you, that every year huge ruined farms are being dismembered all round me by the black-robed gentry, and the small holdings are certainly gaining ground. I know, by the way, at Rognes, of a very curious case—an old woman who, out of less than an acre, makes a living for herself and her man, and a comfortable living too. Yes, Mother Gaga is the nickname they give her, because she doesn't shrink from emptying hers and her husband's chamber-pot over her vegetables, which, I believe, is the Chinese method. But it's little more than gardening, and I don't think I see cereals coming up in beds like turnips. Besides, if the peasant had to produce everything in order to support himself, what would become of our Beaucerons with their wheat, and nothing but wheat, when our Beauce is divided up like a chess-board? . . . However, if we live long enough we shall see whether the future is with the large or small holdings."

He broke off to cry out:

"And the coffee, are we to have it to-day?"

Then, as he lit his pipe, he concluded:

"That is unless they kill us off both alike pretty soon; and that is what seems to be happening. Tell them, Monsieur le Député, that agriculture is in its death-throes, that unless they come to its aid it is dead. Everything tends to crush it—taxes, foreign competition, the continual rise in the price of labour, the attraction of money to commercial and financial investments. Ah, to be sure, nobody is chary of their promises, they all lavish them, the *préfets*, the ministry, the Emperor. And then the road gets dusty, and nothing happens. Do you want the strict truth? Every farmer who sticks to his guns to-day is simply losing his own or somebody else's money. As for me, I've a few sous to fall back upon; that is all right. But I know of men who are borrowing at six per cent. and whose land doesn't bring them in three per cent. The inevitable end of that is ruin. A peasant who borrows is a lost man, he will be stripped of his last shirt. Only last week one of my neighbours was evicted; the father, mother, and four children were turned out in the road, after the limbs of the law had grabbed their cattle, their house, and their land. And yet for years we've been promised the creation of an agricultural loan at reasonable interest. And even hard-working folk are losing heart at it; they think twice before they go and make a child. No, thanks. One more mouth to feed, one more starveling to grow up and wish he had never been born. When there is not enough bread for everyone, no more children are born, and then the nation goes to pieces."

M. de Chédeville, decidedly ill at ease, risked an uncomfortable smile, while he murmured:

"You don't take a cheerful view of things."

"It's true; there are days when I could chuck the whole thing up," Hourdequin answered, gaily. "You see, it's thirty years that the bother has been going on. I don't know why I've gone on so obstinately; I ought to have sold off the farm and done something else. It's habit, no doubt, and the hope that things

will mend. And then—why shouldn't I tell you?—a sort of passion. The Earth—it's like a bad woman: when she once gets hold of you, she doesn't let you go. There, look on that table; it's stupid, perhaps, but I'm consoled when I look at that."

He stretched out his hand and pointed to a silver cup, protected from the flies by a piece of gauze—the prize of honour that he had won at an agricultural show. These shows where he had his triumphs were the stimulus of his vanity, one of the causes of his obstinacy. In spite of the evident weariness of his guest, he persisted in lingering over his coffee, and he had poured brandy into his cup for the third time before he drew out his watch and jumped up suddenly.

"Confound it! It's two o'clock, and I have to be at a meeting of the municipal council. Yes, it's the question of a road. We are willing to pay half the cost of it, but we should like to get a Government subsidy for the balance."

M. de Chédeville had quitted his seat, delighted at being set free.

"Why, now, I can be of use to you, I will get it for you—your subsidy. Can I drive you into Roques in my trap, if you are in a hurry?"

"Thank you."

And Hourdequin went out to have the carriage made ready; it had been left in the centre of the courtyard. When he returned he was unable to find the deputy: at last he discovered him in the kitchen. He had pushed open the door, and was standing there smiling in front of the enchanted Jacqueline, whom he complimented so closely that their faces were almost touching. Each had scented out the character of the other; they understood each other, and their open glances said as much.

When M. de Chédeville had got into his trap, La Cognette kept Hourdequin for a moment to whisper in his ear,—

"Ah—he's nicer than you; *he* don't think I'm a person to be kept out of sight."

On the way, whilst the carriage rolled along between fields

of wheat, the farmer returned to the land, his eternal interest. He made an offer now of his written memoranda, his figures; for some years past he had kept accounts. In La Beauce, hardly three men did as much, and the small proprietors, the peasants, shrugged their shoulders, without so much as understanding. Yet it was only by keeping accounts that one could grasp one's situation, and realize which of one's products made a profit and which a loss. They showed also the net cost of everything, and, consequently, the proceeds of each sale. With him, every man, each animal, each production had its page, with two columns, debit and credit, so that he was kept constantly aware of the result of his operations, whether they were good or bad.

"At least," he said, with his big laugh, "I know how I am being ruined."

But he broke off to swear between his teeth. For some minutes, as the trap drew near, he had been trying to take in a scene in the distance, at the side of the road. Although it was Sunday, he had sent out there a reaping machine of a new character bought quite recently to mow a plot of lucerne that was urgent. And the man in charge, without any misgiving, not recognizing his master in the strange carriage, went on making fun of the machine, with three peasants who had stopped on their way.

"Ugh!" he declared, "look at it—ain't it a scare-crow? . . . And it crushes the grass, it poisons it. My word! There are three sheep already who've died of it."

The peasants chuckled; they examined the machine as though it were some strange and formidable beast. One of them declared:

"All such things are devil's tricks to harm poor folk. What will become of our wives when they're not wanted at the hay-making?"

"A bloody lot the masters care for that," replied the labourer, giving the machine a kick. "That's for your ugly mug!"

Hourdequin had overheard. He thrust his neck out of the carriage, furiously.

"Get back to the farm, Zéphyrin! and tell them to pay you off."

The man stood there blankly; the three peasants went off with insolent laughter, making mocking remarks in a loud key.

"That's it," said Hourdequin, dropping on his seat again. "You have seen it yourself. . . . One would think that our perfected instruments burned their hands. They treat me as an amateur; they give less labour to my farm than to any other, because they pretend I can afford to pay through the nose; and they are upheld by the farmers, my neighbours, who accuse me of teaching slovenly labour to the country-side, and are furious because, as they say, they soon will not find enough people to do their work as in the good old time."

The carriage was entering Roques by the Bazoches-le-Doyen road, when the deputy caught sight of the Abbé Godard, who was issuing from Macqueron's, where this Sunday he had lunched after Mass. The thought of his re-election seized him again; he asked:

"And the religious feeling in our rural districts?"

"Oh, people conform—there's nothing underneath it," answered Hourdequin, indifferently.

He had the trap stopped outside Macqueron's inn—he had remained in front of his door with the Abbé, and he presented his colleague, who was wearing an old, greasy overcoat. But Cœlina, very neat in her print gown, ran out, pushing in front of her Berthe, the pride of the family, dressed like a young lady, in a silk dress with little mauve stripes. While this was happening, the village, which had seemed as though dead, as if it had been rendered sluggish by the fine Sunday, woke up again beneath the surprise of this memorable visit. Peasants came out one by one, children peeped from behind their mother's petticoats. In the Lengaigne's house, especially, there was a stir: he poked out his head, razor in hand, whilst Flore paused in her occupation of weighing out twopenny-worth of tobacco, and pressed her face against the window-pane. They were both

torn with anger at the sight of these gentlemen descending at their rival's door. Little by little people drew near, groups formed; already, from one end to the other, Roques had heard of the important event.

"Monsieur le Député," repeated Macqueron, very red and embarrassed, "this is really an honour. . . ."

But M. de Chédeville was not listening; he was enchanted with the pretty face of Berthe, whose clear eyes, with the faint bluish circles round them, considered him boldly. Her mother told her age, and explained where she had got her schooling, while the girl herself, smiling and curtseying, invited the gentleman to enter, if he would condescend so far.

"Ah, my dear child! How can you suppose. . . ." he cried.

All this time, the Abbé Godard, who had buttonholed Hourdequin, was imploring him, once more, to persuade the municipal council to vote a sum for supplying Roques with a residential Curé. He came back to the subject every six months, unfolded the reasons: the fatigue it caused him, his continual disputes with the village, not to speak of the interests of religion.

"Don't say no!" he added quickly, noticing the farmer's deprecating gesture.

"Bring it up again, try and get an answer."

And just as M. de Chédeville was about to follow Berthe, he ran up and stopped him, with his air of obstinate good humour.

"I beg your pardon, Monsieur le Député. Our poor church here is in such a state. I want to show it you, you ought to get them to restore it for me. Me, they won't listen to. . . . Come, pray, come with me!"

Greatly bored, the ancient buck was refusing, when Hourdequin, hearing from Macqueron that several municipal councillors were at the *Mairie*, where they had been awaiting him for half an hour, said with his uncompromising frankness:

"That's right, go and see the church. . . . You will kill the time until I've done, and then you can give me a lift back."

M. de Chédeville had to follow the Abbé. The groups had

augmented, several set off to walk in his rear. Their courage was growing, they were all thinking of asking him for something.

When Hourdequin and Macqueron had climbed the stairs opposite, they found in the hall of the *Mairie* three councillors, Delhomme and two more. The hall, a huge white-washed apartment, was destitute of any furniture, except a long table of white deal and twelve straw chairs; between the two windows which fronted the road there was a sealed cupboard in which the archives were kept, as well as divers other administrative documents; while round the walls on the boards there was a row of canvas fire-buckets, the gift of some townsman, that they could find no place for, and that remained as useless lumber, for they were without a hydrant.

"Gentlemen," said Hourdequin, urbanely, "I beg your pardon, but Monsieur de Chédeville has been lunching with me."

No one stirred; it was impossible to say whether they accepted his excuse. They had seen the deputy's arrival from the window, and the approach of the election excited them; but nothing was gained by talking too fast.

"The devil!" cried the farmer; "if we are only five, we shall not be able to come to any decision."

Luckily, Lengaigne entered. At first he had decided not to go to the council since he was not interested in the question of the road; he hoped, besides, that his absence would prevent a vote being taken. Then, torn with curiosity at M. de Chédeville's visit, he had made up his mind to look in and find out about it.

"Good! Now we are six we shall be able to take a vote," cried the mayor.

Lequeu, who filled the post of secretary, having put in an appearance, looking sly and sullen, the minute-book of the meetings under his arm, nothing prevented them from opening the debate. But Delhomme had begun to talk in a low voice to

his neighbour, Clou, the blacksmith, a tall, thin, dark man. Finding that people were listening to them, they became silent. But a name had been caught, that of the independent candidate, M. Rochefontaine; and thenceforth they all, after glancing at each other searchingly, indulged in a word or a sneer or a contemptuous grimace in reference to this candidate, with whom they were not even acquainted. They were for order and the maintenance of society, and submission to the authorities, which were the stay of trade. Did the gentleman think himself stronger than the Government? Was he going to bring up the price of wheat to thirty francs the hectolitre? It was a nice bit of brag to send out circulars, with promises of more butter than bread, which bound you to nothing and nobody. They went so far as to speak of him as an adventurer, a cunning rascal, who beat up the villages with a view to stealing their votes, as he would have robbed them of their halfpence. Hourdequin, who could have explained to them that M. Rochefontaine, being a free-trader, was substantially of like opinion with the Emperor, was perfectly willing to let Macqueron display his Bonapartist zeal, and Delhomme lay down the law with the good sense of his narrow-mindedness; whilst Lengaigne, whose mouth was shut by his position as a monopolist, grumbled in his corner and was forced to swallow his vague Republican notions. Although M. de Chédville had not even been mentioned, everything that was said pointed to him, was an abasement, as it were, before his title as official candidate.

"Come, now, gentlemen," said the mayor, "suppose we begin the proceedings."

He had taken his place at the table, in his presidential seat—a chair with a larger back than the others, and adorned with arms. Only his deputy sat down beside him. Of the four councillors two remained standing, two were leaning against a window ledge. But Lequeu had handed the mayor a sheet of paper, and he whispered in his ear; then he went outside with dignity.

"Gentlemen," said Hourdequin, "this is a communication from the schoolmaster."

It was agreed that it should be read. It was a request for an increase of salary, based on the energy which he brought to his work—an increase of thirty francs a year. Every face clouded. They were all as avaricious with the communal funds, especially where the school was concerned, as if they came out of the pockets of each man individually. There was not even a discussion; they refused point blank.

"Good! We will tell him to wait. The young man is in too great a hurry. And now let us get on with this matter of a road."

"Excuse me, Monsieur le Maire," interrupted Macqueron, "I should like to say a word with reference to the church."

Hourdequin was surprised; he understood now why the Abbé Godard had lunched with the innkeeper. What was the latter aiming at, that he put himself forward so prominently? However, his proposition met the same fate as the schoolmaster's petition. He might talk long enough before he would persuade them that they were rich enough to pay a priest of their own, or that it was a shabby thing to put up with what was left from Bazoches-le-Doyen: they all shrugged their shoulders, and asked if Mass would be any better for it. No, no! it would mean repairing the presbytery; a priest of one's own was too expensive; and half-an-hour of the other's time, on Sundays, was sufficient.

The mayor, annoyed at his subordinate's initiative, concluded: "It is not the place for discussion, the council has already decided. And now for our road; we must finish about it. Delhomme, would you be so kind as to call in Monsieur Lequeu? Does the fellow suppose we are going to debate his letter till this evening?"

Lequeu, who was waiting on the stairs, entered with a sombre air; and as nobody acquainted him with the result of his petition, he remained stiff and uneasy, swelling with suppressed anger,

Oh, these peasants—what a beastly crew! He had to find the plan of the road in the cupboard, and come and spread it out on the table.

The council knew it well, this plan. For years it had been hanging about. But none the less they all drew near, leant their elbows on the table, and examined it once more. The mayor explained its advantages for Rognes; an easy incline, which would allow carriages to come up to the church; next, a saving of six miles upon the present road to Châteaudun, which went through Cloyes; and the commune would be responsible for no more than three kilomètres, their neighbours at Blauville having already voted the other section as far as its junction with the main road from Châteaudun to Orléans. They listened to him, their eyes glued to the paper, without opening their mouths. It was the question of expropriations which, more than anything else, had stood in the way of the project. Everyone saw a means of fortune there, and was anxious to know whether one of his fields would be required and he could sell his land to the commune at a hundred francs the pole. If it was not to encroach upon one of his fields, why should he give a vote which should enrich his neighbour? They laughed in their sleeves at the easier incline and the shorter road. Were only their horses to benefit by it, then? Neither had Hourdequin any need to make them talk in order to get at their opinion. He himself was only so set upon the road because it passed by the farm and disposed of several of his fields. Similarly, Macqueron and Delhomme, who owned ground that it must skirt, were anxious to vote it. That made three; but neither Clou nor the other councillor had any interest in the matter, while Lengaigne was violently opposed to the scheme, having in the first place nothing to gain thereby, and being, moreover, in despair at the notion of his rival the deputy-mayor benefiting by it. If Clou and the other, who was doubtful, voted wrong, they would be three against three. Hourdequin grew uneasy. At last the debate began.

"What's the good of it? What's the good of it?" repeated

Lengaigne. "Isn't there a road already? It's just for the pleasure of spending money, of robbing Peter to pay Paul. . . . As for you, you've promised to make a present of your ground."

This was a sly thrust at Macqueron. But the latter, who bitterly regretted his impulse of generosity, lied vigorously.

"I—I've promised nothing. Who told you that?"

"Who? Why, you! Good Lord! And before witnesses. Come now, Monsieur Lequeu was there; he can speak. Am I right, Monsieur Lequeu?"

The schoolmaster, furious at being kept in suspense as to his fate, made a gesture of brutal contempt. What did he care about their sordid differences?

"Well, really," Lengaigne continued, "if there's no more honesty in the world, I'd sooner go and live in the woods. No, no! I'll have none of your road! A fine piece of robbery!"

Seeing that matters were going wrong, the mayor hastened to interfere.

"This is mere child's play. We don't want to go into private quarrels. It's the public interest, the interest of the community which should be our guide."

"To be sure," declared Delhomme sagely. "The road will be of great service to all the community. Only we must know where we are going. The *préfet* is always saying: 'Vote a certain sum, then we will see what the Government will do for you.' And, suppose it did nothing, what is the use of wasting time in voting?"

Suddenly, Hourdequin thought it time to come out with his big news, which he had kept in reserve.

"With regard to that, gentlemen, I beg to inform you that Monsieur de Chédeville has undertaken to obtain a Government subsidy for half the cost. You know he's the Emperor's friend. He will only have to speak of us to him, over their wine."

Lengaigne himself was shaken, every face took a sanctimonious expression, as though the Blessed Sacrament had passed by. And the deputy's re-election was assured in any case; the

Emperor's friend was the right man, the one who was at the fountain-head of money and of honours, the man they knew, honourable, and powerful, the master! After that they could only nod their heads approvingly. Things went on wheels; what was the good of speech?

Hourdequin, however, was rendered uneasy at the silent attitude of Clou. He rose and cast a glance into the street; and catching sight of the gamekeeper he bade him go and find Daddy Loiseau, and bring him there, alive or dead. This Loiseau was an old deaf peasant, Macqueron's uncle, who had procured his election to the council, to which he never came, because, he said, it gave him a headache. His son worked at La Borderie, and he was absolutely at the disposition of the mayor. So that as soon as he appeared, all breathless, the latter had only to shout into his ear that it was about the road. Already they were all awkwardly writing down their votes, their noses on the paper, and their arms spread out so that no one should look. Then they proceeded to take the vote for a moiety of the cost in a little box of white deal like a church alms'-box. The majority was splendid: there were six for, and only one against, the project—Lengaigne. That beggar, Clou, had voted straight! And the sitting was raised after everybody had signed on the register the minutes which the schoolmaster had got ready beforehand, leaving a blank for the result of the division. They all went off clumsily, without a nod or a handshake, trooping down the stairs.

"Ah, I was forgetting," said Hourdequin to Lequeu, who still lingered; "your request for a rise was rejected. The council consider that too much is spent on the school already."

"Brute beasts!" cried the young man, livid with anger, when he was alone. "Go and live with your pigs!"

The sitting had lasted two hours, and Hourdequin found M. de Chédeville in front of the *Mairie;* he was only just back from his tour round the village. To begin with, the curé had not spared him one of the church's dilapidations: the leaking

roof, the broken windows, the bare walls. Then, as he escaped at last from the sacristy, which required repainting, the inhabitants, become quite bold, began to dispute him, each one carrying him off with a complaint to make, or a favour to beg. This one dragged him to the communal pond which, for lack of money, was no longer maintained; another required a covered washhouse by the side of the Aigre; a third demanded that the road should be widened in front of his door to give his trap room to turn round; and as a climax, one old woman, after having enticed the deputy to her house, showed him her swollen legs, and asked him if he didn't know of a cure in Paris. Confused and breathless, he smiled and made himself agreeable, and was perpetually promising things. Ah! a good sort he was, and not proud with poor folk!

"Well, shall we be off?" Hourdequin asked. "I'm expected at the farm." But just then Cœlina and her daughter Berthe ran out once more to their door, and begged M. de Chédeville to step in for a moment. And the latter would have asked nothing better, and began to breathe again, delighted to have another glimpse of the young person with the pretty clear eyes marked with the dark rings.

"No, no," the farmer broke in, "we haven't time—another day!" And he compelled him, heedlessly, to climb into the trap, while he paused at a question from the curé, to answer that the council had made no alteration in the matter of the parish.

The coachman whipped up his horse, the carriage rattled off through the familiar and delighted village. The abbé, the only discontented person, started to compass on foot the three kilomètres between Rognes and Bazoches-le-Doyen.

A fortnight later M. de Chédeville was elected by a large majority; and by the end of August he had kept his word, and the subsidy was granted to the commune for the completion of the new road. The work was started at once.

Upon the evening when the first blow of a pick-axe had been

laid to it, Cœlina, dark and lean, was at the fountain listening to La Bécu, who stood erect, with her hands folded beneath her apron, and talked interminably. For a week the fountain had been revolutionized by this big business of the road. Nothing was talked of but the money it had brought to some people, and the scurrilous anger of the others. Every day La Bécu kept Cœlina informed of what Flore Lengaigne said—not to make mischief between them, of course; but, on the contrary, to bring about an explanation, which was the best way of coming to an understanding. Women forgot their work, and stood there, swinging their arms, their full pitchers at their feet.

"Well, then, she told me it was a put-up job between the mayor and the deputy-mayor—a trick to make money out of their land. And she said besides that your man said one thing and meant another."

And this moment Flore issued from her house, pitcher in hand. When her big, fat figure had come up, Cœlina, who had suddenly burst out with a flood of foul language, stuck her arms akimbo, and feeling her sense of virtue outraged, went for her in fine fashion, twitting her with her troll of a daughter, accusing her even of allowing the customers to tumble herself.

The other, slipshod and whimpering, contented herself with repeating, "Oh, the filthy beast, the filthy beast!"

La Bécu threw herself between them, tried to make them embrace, with the result that they almost tore each other's hair out.

Then she came out with a piece of news:

"By the way, do you know the Mouche girls will make five hundred francs?"

"It's not possible!"

And immediately the quarrel was forgotten; they all clustered together in the centre of their scattered pitchers. Why, of course! The road, higher up at Cornailles, ran alongside of the Mouche girls' field, which it pared of two hundred and fifty

metres; at forty sous the metre, that came exactly to five hundred francs, and the ground bordering it would be increased in value. What luck!

"I say," said Flore, "Lise will be a good match now, in spite of the brat. That old duffer, the Corporal, was not so green after all in sticking to it."

"Unless," added Cœlina, "Buteau takes his place. His share, as well, gains finely by this road."

La Bécu looked round, and nudged them with her elbow.

"Hush! hold your tongues!"

It was Lise, who marched up gaily, swinging her pitcher.

And the procession past the fountain began again.

CHAPTER VI

Lise and Françoise, having got rid of Blanchette, who had grown too fat, and would calve no more, made up their minds, that Saturday, to go to the market at Cloyes and buy another cow. Jean offered to drive them there in one of the carts belonging to the farm. He was free for the afternoon, and the master had given him permission to take the trap, being aware of the rumours of impending marriage between the young man and the elder of the two girls. Indeed, the affair was settled; at least, Jean had promised to look up Buteau on the following Saturday, and put the question to him. One or the other, there must be an end of the thing.

They started about one o'clock; Jean was in front with Lise, Françoise was alone on the back seat. From time to time, he turned his head and smiled at the latter; her knees were in his back and kept him warm. It was a great pity that she was fifteen years his junior; and if he had resigned himself to marrying the elder, after much thought and procrastination, it must have been, in his heart of hearts, because he knew that he would live like a relation near the younger. Then, man has a way of drifting. We do so many things, without knowing the wherefore, simply because we have said one day that we should do them.

As they entered Cloyes, Jean put on the brake, and started the horse down the steep hill past the cemetery; and when he emerged at the junction of the Grande Rue and the Rue Grouaise, to put up his horse at the sign of the *Good Husbandman*, he suddenly pointed out the back of a man, who was going along the latter street.

"See! It looks like Buteau!"

"That's him," Lise declared. "I expect he's on his way

to see Monsieur Baillehache. Do you think he'll be for taking his share? "

Jean cracked his whip, laughing.

" One can never tell, he's so sly."

Buteau had not appeared to see them, although he had recognized them a long way off. He walked on, his shoulders stooping; and they both watched him disappear, with the same thought, though neither of them expressed it, that there would be a chance of coming to an understanding. In the courtyard of the *Good Husbandman* Françoise, who was still silent, was the first to descend by means of the wheel. The court was already full of unyoked carriages, resting on their shafts, whilst a murmur of life and energy buzzed through the old buildings of the inn.

" Well, shall we be off? " asked Jean, when he returned from the stable, where he had accompanied his horse.

" Yes, at once."

However, once outside, instead of proceeding straight, by the Rue du Temple, to the cattle-market, which was held in the Rue St. George, the young man and the two girls halted, and dawdled along the Rue Grande, through the fruit and vegetable stalls which were set up on either side of the road. He was wearing a silk cap, and a big blue blouse over his black cloth trousers. The girls were also in their Sunday finery, their hair plaited down under their little round caps, and they were dressed exactly alike, in dark woollen bodices and iron-gray skirts, set off by large cotton aprons with narrow pink stripes. They did not join arms, but walked along in single file, swinging their hands, through the jostling crowd. There was a crush of maid-servants and house-wives in front of the peasant women squatting on their haunches. Each of them had come in with one or two baskets, and they had simply placed them open on the ground. They recognized La Frimat, her arms broken with the weight of all manner of things in her two overflowing baskets—lettuces, beans, plums, and even three live rabbits. Next

to her an old man had just emptied a cartful of potatoes on to the ground, and was selling them by the bushel. Two women, a mother and daughter—the latter, Norine, a famous good-for-nothing—were spreading out on a rickety stall, cod and salted and sour herrings, the emptyings of the bottom of a cask, the strong brine from which tickled one's nose. And the Rue Grande, so deserted for the rest of the week, in spite of its fine shops, its chemist, its ironmonger, and above all its "*Parisian Novelties*," Lambourdieu's bazaar, was not broad enough of a Saturday, it was so blocked with stalls; and the passage of the road was impossible from the invasion of the market-women.

Lise and Françoise, followed by Jean, pushed their way, somehow or other, as far as the poultry-market, in the Rue Blaudonnière. Huge baskets, with latticed openings, had been sent there from the farms. Cocks crowed within them, and ducks pushed out alarmed heads. Chickens that had been killed and plucked were laid out in rows, several deep, on the slabs. Then there were more peasant women still, each bringing in her four or five pounds of butter, her few dozen eggs, her cheeses—some big and dry, others small and rich, and the finer kind, of an ashen-gray tone. Several had come with two pairs of fowls, tied together by their feet. Ladies were marketing; a large arrival of eggs collected a crowd in front of an inn, the *Poulterer's Exchange*. Just there, amongst the men who were discharging the eggs, Palmyre was seen, for on Saturdays, when there was no work to be found at Roques, she hired out her services at Cloyes, and carried weights enough to break her back.

"There's someone who earns her bread!" Jean remarked.

The crowd was constantly increasing. Vehicles were still pouring in by the Mondoubleau road. They defiled across the bridge at a gentle trot. To left and right the Loire unwound itself with its gradual winding, flowing past the edge of meadows, and skirting on the left the gardens of the town, with their lilacs and laburnums, whose overhanging branches brushed the water. Higher up there was a tan-mill which

ticked sonorously, and a big corn-mill, a huge building, whose wings high up on the roof, whitened it with a continual shower of flour.

"Well," Jean resumed, "shall we be off?"

"Yes, yes."

And they returned by the Rue Grande; but they stopped in the Place Saint Lubin opposite the *Mairie*, where the corn-market was held. Lengaigne, who had brought in four sacks, was standing there with his hands in his pockets. In the centre of a flock of peasants, who were silent, with downcast eyes, Hourdequin was holding forth with gesticulations of anger. They had hoped for a rise; but even the current price of eighteen francs was shaky; they feared it would end by dropping twenty-five centimes. Macqueron passed with his daughter Berthe on his arm: he, in a dirty old overcoat, she in a muslin dress, with a cluster of roses and lilies-of-the-valley in her hat. As Lise and Françoise, after turning into the Rue du Temple, were passing the Church of St. George, against which the dealers in hosiery and tinware and bales of cloth had installed themselves, they suddenly exclaimed:

"Oh, Aunt Rose!"

Indeed, it was old Madame Fouan, whom her daughter Fanny, who had come in Delhomme's stead to deliver some oats, had brought with her in the trap, merely to give her some distraction. They were both waiting, standing in front of the whirring wheel of a knife-grinder, to whom the old woman had given her scissors. For the last thirty years he had ground them.

"What! is it you?"

Fanny had turned round, and, noticing Jean, she added:

"I suppose you are out a-pleasuring?"

But when they heard that the cousins had come to buy a cow in place of Blanchette, they grew interested and accompanied them, the oats having been already disposed of.

The young man, who was displaced, fell behind the four

women, who straggled on in front; and so they emerged into the Place St. George. It was a huge square, the Place, situated behind the chancel of the church, which soared over it with its old stone tower and its clock. Avenues of bushy lime trees enclosed its four sides, two of which were protected by chains fastened to posts, whilst the other two were furnished with long wooden bars to which the animals were tied up. On the side of the Place, looking on the gardens, grass was growing—one might have fancied one's self in a meadow; whilst the opposite side, skirted by two roads, lined with drinking-shops—the *St. George*, the *Racine*, the *Good Harvesters*—was trampled down and hard and white with the dust that blasts of wind scattered all about. Lise and Françoise, accompanied by the others, had the difficult task of crossing the central square, where the crowd was thickest. In the confused mass of blouses of every shade of blue, from the crude blue of new material to the pale blue of stuff that had faded from a score of washings, there was nothing else visible except the white, round blots of the little caps. A few ladies displayed the glistening silk of their parasols. There were laughs, sharp cries, which were lost in the great murmur of life, into which every now and then the neighing of horses and the lowing of cattle broke. A donkey started braying violently.

"This way," said Lise, turning her head.

The horses were at the end, fastened to the bar, their backs bare and shining, with only a rope attached to their necks and tails. To the left were the cows in almost complete liberty: simply kept in hand by the owners, who moved them from place to place in order to display them better. Groups formed and examined them, and there was no laughter here—people hardly spoke.

The four women had immediately fallen into contemplation of a black-and-white cow, a Corentine, which a family—husband and wife—had come to sell. The woman was in front, sunburnt and with an obstinate expression, holding the animal; the

man, behind, impassive and reserved. There was a thoughtful and searching examination for five minutes, but they neither exchanged words nor glances; and they moved on, took up position in front of a second cow twenty paces off. This one was a huge creature, entirely black, and it was offered for sale by a young girl, almost a child. She looked pretty, as she swung her hazel switch. Then there were seven or eight more of these halting intervals, equally long and silent, as they passed from one end to the other of the line of animals for sale.

Finally, the four women returned in front of the first cow; once more they became engrossed in it. Only this time it was more serious. They had disposed themselves in a row, and they searched the skin of the Corentine with their fixed, acute gaze. The saleswoman, on her side, made no remark. Her eyes were averted, as though she had not seen them come back and station themselves in front of her. Fanny, however, bent down her head and whispered something to Lise. Old Madame Fouan and Françoise similarly breathed a word into each other's ear. Then they fell back into their motionless silence. The inspection was resumed.

"How much?" asked Lise, suddenly.

"Forty pistoles," replied the peasant woman.

They affected to be put to rout; and as they were looking for Jean, they were surprised to find him behind them with Buteau. Both were talking away like old friends. Buteau had come from La Chamade to buy a little pig, and he was there conducting the bargain. The pigs, in a movable sty at the bottom of the car which had brought them there, were biting each other and squealing to an absolutely deafening extent.

"Will you take twenty francs?" Buteau asked the salesman.

"No, thirty."

"Gar'n! Go to bed with it, then."

And, looking hearty and gay, he came to meet the women, laughing easily at the sight of his mother, his sister, and his two cousins, just as though he had parted from them only the

day before. They, on their side, retained their placid attitude, with no appearance of remembering the two years of quarrel and storm. The mother alone, who had been informed of the previous encounter in the Rue Grouaise, watched him out of her wrinkled eyes, seeking to know his purpose in visiting the lawyer. But nothing of that was apparent. Neither the one nor the other opened their mouths.

"So, cousin," he began, "you're after buying a cow, Jean has told me. Look there—there's one, the best in the market, a real fine beast."

He pointed out precisely the black-and-white Corentine.

"Forty pistoles, no thanks!" murmured Françoise.

"Are you worth forty pistoles, little one?" he said, giving her a push in the back by way of a joke.

But she grew angry, and returned his push with a furious look of disgust.

"Let me alone, will you? I don't play like that with men."

That made him merrier than ever; he turned to Lise, who was still looking grave, and rather pale.

"And you, would you like me to have a look in? I bet I get it for thirty pistoles! Will you bet five francs?"

"Yes, I'm willing . . . if you like to try."

Rose and Fanny nodded approvingly: they knew the fellow was terrible at a bargain, stubborn and impudent, quick to lie and swindle, he could sell things for three times their value, and get them for next to nothing. The women, therefore, let him come forward with Jean, whilst they themselves lingered in the background that he might not seem to be with them.

The crowd was increasing in the neighbourhood of the animals; groups detached themselves from the sunny centre of the square, to throng beneath the avenues. There was a continual coming and going; the blue of the blouses grew darker in the shadow of the lime trees, and the dancing silhouettes of the leaves tinged the ruddy faces with green. However, nobody had bought anything yet, not a single sale had been concluded, although the

market had been open for an hour. But over their heads the sound of a disturbance was borne along by the warm wind. Two horses tied together, side by side, had reared and were champing at each other, to an accompaniment of frantic neighing and the clatter of their hoofs on the paving-stones. People took alarm, women ran off, until calm was at last restored by oaths and a mighty use of whips which cracked like fire-arms. On the ground in the vacant space caused by the panic, a flock of pigeons swooped down and ran about, picking oats out of the dung.

"Well, mother, what are you selling for?" Buteau asked of the peasant woman.

The latter, who had seen through the ruse, answered quietly: "Forty pistoles!"

At first he treated the thing as a joke; turned with his chaff to the man who was still holding himself aloof in silence.

"I say, master, is your old woman thrown in at that price?"

But, without ceasing to jest, he made a close examination of the cow, and found her to be made as a good milker should be: the head lean, with sharp horns, and large eyes, the belly somewhat thick and streaked with big veins, the limbs slender, the tail thin and set high up. He stooped down, and satisfied himself as to the length of the udders and the elasticity of the teats, which were set squarely and properly pierced. Then, with one hand resting on the animal, he began the bargain, mechanically feeling the bones of her crupper.

"Forty pistoles, you say? That's ridiculous. Will you take thirty?"

His hand was satisfied with the strength and disposition of the bones. It went lower and slid between the thighs, at the spot where the naked skin, of a fine saffron colour, promised an abundance of milk.

"Well, shall we say thirty pistoles?"

"No, forty," replied the peasant woman.

He turned his back on her; then he came back and she made up her mind to treat with him.

"It's a good beast, come now, altogether! It will be two years old come Whitsuntide, and it will calve in a fortnight. . . . I'm sure it's just what will suit you."

"Thirty pistoles," he repeated.

Then, as he moved away, she cast a glance at her husband, and cried:

"Come, here's my last word. Give us thirty-five and have done with it."

He stopped and began to run the cow down. It was not a nice shape, it was weak in the loins; in short, it was a sickly animal, and one would keep it two years and lose over it. Then he pretended that it had a wound in its foot, which was untrue. He lied for the sake of lying, with a transparent dishonesty, in the hope of goading the saleswoman into an indiscretion. But she shrugged her shoulders.

"Thirty pistoles."

"No, thirty-five."

She let him go away. He joined the women again, told them that the game was beginning, and that they must go and bargain for another. The group went and planted itself in front of the big black cow, which the pretty girl was holding by a rope. This one happened to be just three hundred francs. He made as if he did not think it too dear, rhapsodised over it, and then suddenly went back to the first.

"Then it's settled; I'm to take my money somewhere else?"

"Lord! if it was reasonable, but it's not reasonable. . . . You must pluck up a bit more courage on your side."

And bending forward, grasping the udder in her hand:

"Just look here, what a beauty it is!"

But he was not convinced; he said once more:

"Thirty pistoles."

"No, thirty-five."

Suddenly, the bargain seemed to be off. Buteau had taken Jean's arm to mark the fact of his abandoning the affair. The women rejoined them, in some disturbance, thinking, for their

part, that the cow was worth the three hundred and fifty francs. Françoise in particular, who was set upon it, spoke of concluding at that price. But Buteau lost his temper: it was nonsense to let people rob you like that! And for nearly an hour he held out, in spite of the cousins' anxiety; they trembled each time a purchaser halted in front of the animal. Buteau, also, never ceased watching out of a corner of his eye; but that was the game, in such matters one had to be strong-minded. Surely, nobody was likely to be so quick with their money; they should see, whether there was an idiot there, who would pay more than three hundred francs for it. And, in effect, the money did not seem forthcoming, although the market was drawing to its close. Meanwhile, they were trying horses in the road. One perfectly white horse galloped along, goaded by the harsh cries of a man who held the rope, and ran along by its side; whilst Patoir, the veterinary surgeon, red and puffy, standing beside the purchaser at one corner of the Place, his two hands in his pockets, looked on, and gave advice at the top of his voice. The taverns buzzed with the constant passage of topers entering and issuing, and returning, in the course of the interminable discussions over their bargains. The noise and disturbance was at its height, people could no longer hear each other speak. A calf, separated from its mother, bleated perpetually; dogs in the midst of the crowd, black retrievers, big yellow water-spaniels, ran off howling over their injured paws. Then there were sudden silences, during which nothing was heard except a flight of rooks disturbed by the noise who eddied with hoarse caws towards the summit of the steeple. And dominating the reeking odour from the cattle, a pungent smell of burnt horn issued from a neighbouring smithy, where the peasants, taking advantage of market-day, were having their beasts shod.

"Well, thirty?" repeated Buteau, unweariedly, approaching the peasant-woman again.

"No, thirty-five."

Then, as another purchaser was there, haggling also, he seized

the cow by the jaws, and opened them violently to see the teeth. Then he dropped them with a grimace. Just then the beast happened to drop some dung, the pats that fell were soft; as he followed them with his eyes his grimace was accentuated. The other purchaser, a big, sallow man, was impressed by it, and went off.

"I don't want her now," said Buteau, "her blood's bad."

This time the woman made the mistake of losing her temper. That was what he wanted; she became abusive, he answered with a torrent of filthy language. People flocked round them, laughing. Behind the woman the husband still remained impassive. At last, he nudged her elbow, and suddenly she cried:

"Will you take her for thirty-two pistoles?"

"No, thirty."

He was moving away again when she called him back in a strangled voice.

"Well, take her, then, you bloody bugger! But, s'help me! if it was to do again, I'd sooner smash your blasted face for you!"

She was beside herself, tremulous with rage. He was laughing boisterously, and he threw her some compliments—offered to make it up by having her. Lise had joined them immediately. She drew the woman aside and gave her the three hundred francs behind the trunk of a tree. Françoise was already holding the cow, but Jean had to shove the beast from behind, for she declined to budge. They had been tramping about for two hours. Rose and Fanny had been waiting for the *dénouement* in silence without showing any signs of weariness. When at last they started off, they looked round for Buteau, who had disappeared. They found him beating down the pig-dealer. He had just got his little pig for twenty francs; and when he had to pay he first counted out the money in his pocket, then he brought out the exact sum and counted it over again in his half-shut hand. It was quite a business afterwards when he wanted to poke the pig into a sack that he had brought under his blouse. The rotten

stuff split, and the animal's feet and loins protruded. He managed to fling it in some fashion over one shoulder, and he carried it so, grunting and snorting, and uttering piercing cries.

"Come now, Lise, my five francs," he demanded. "I've won them."

She gave him them for a joke, not believing that he would claim them. But he took them readily, and pocketed them. Then they all wended their way slowly towards the *Good Husbandman.*

It was the end of the market. Money was glittering in the sunshine, and it rang upon the counters of the wine shops. In the angle of the Place St. Georges only a few animals which had not been sold were left. Little by little the crowd had ebbed away, in the direction of the Rue Grande, where the dealers in fruit and vegetables were opening a thoroughfare by removing their empty baskets. In the Poultry Market also there was nothing left but feathers and straw. And already carts were starting off; they were harnessing at the inns, and disentangling the reins, which had been fastened to rings in the pavement. In every direction, from every side, the wheels rolled, and blue blouses were inflated by the wind, as they jolted over the paving stones.

Lengaigne passed, making his little black horse trot, having taken advantage of his excursion to buy a scythe. Macqueron and his daughter Berthe still lingered about the shops. As for La Frimat, she returned on foot, as heavily laden as ever, for she brought back her baskets full of dung that she picked up on the way. In the chemists shop, in the Rue Grande, Palmyre was waiting, amidst all the gilding, erect in spite of her weariness, whilst a draught was made up for her brother, who had been ailing for the last week. But what caused the Mouche girls to hasten their laggard steps was the sight of Jesus Christ, very drunk, walking in the middle of the road. They guessed rightly that he had raised money to-day by mortgaging his last plot of ground. He was laughing to himself, and the five-franc

pieces chinked in his huge pockets. As they came at last to the *Good Husbandman*, Buteau said simply, with a sprightly air:

"What, are you off? Look here, Lise, why not stay with your sister, and have a bite of something?"

She was surprised, and as she turned towards Jean, he added:

"Jean can stay too, I shall be very pleased."

Rose and Fanny exchanged glances. No doubt the lad had something in his head. His face was as inscrutable as ever. Never mind! They must take care not to stand in the way.

"That's right," said Fanny, "you stay. I must be off with mother. We're expected."

Françoise, who had not let go of the cow, declared dryly,—

"I must be off, too."

And she stuck to it obstinately. An inn bothered her; she wanted to take her beast home at once. They were obliged to yield, she became so disagreeable. The cow was fastened behind the cart as soon as it was harnessed, and the three women got up. It was not till then that Rose, who was expecting some admission from her son, plucked up courage to ask him,—

"You've no message for your father?"

"No, nothing," Buteau replied.

She looked straight into his eyes; she persisted:

"Is there nothing fresh, then?"

"When there's anything fresh, you'll know it as soon as it's time."

Fanny touched up her horse, which started off leisurely, whilst the cow behind let herself be drawn along, sticking out her head. And Lise remained alone with Buteau and Jean.

At six o'clock all three were settled in a room in the inn, which opened out of the café. Buteau had gone to the kitchen to order an omelette and a rabbit, without letting them know whether he meant to stand treat. Lise, meanwhile, had urged Jean to explain the situation, to clinch matters, and save another ride. But they finished the omelette, and were setting to work on the stewed rabbit, and the young man in his embarrassment

had so far done nothing. The other, on his side, seemed equally far from such considerations. He ate greedily, laughed with his mouth full, and gave the cousin and the comrade friendly nudges with his knees under the table. Then they talked more seriously. There was the question of Rognes and the new road; and if there was not a single word spoken about the indemnity of five hundred francs, that fact was no less obviously lying at the bottom of all they said.

Buteau began his jokes again, drank their healths, whilst in his gray eyes there floated visibly a notion of good business to be done—his third share become profitable, his old love marriageable, now that her field adjoining his own had almost doubled in value.

"So help me!" he cried, "aren't we going to have some coffee?"

"Three coffees!" Jean gave the order.

And an hour was spent sipping them; the decanter of brandy was emptied, and still Buteau had not declared himself. He advanced and retreated, spun out interminably, as though he were still haggling over the cow. Actually it was settled, but a man must see where he's going to, all the same! Suddenly he turned to Lise; he said to her:

"Why haven't you brought the child?"

She set off laughing, realizing that it had come this time; and she gave him a slap, contented herself with replying, happy and indulgent,—

"Oh, Buteau, what an old donkey you are!"

That was all; he made merry also. The marriage was fixed. Jean, embarrassed hitherto, laughed with them with an air of relief. He even spoke out at last, told everything.

"You know you've done well to come back, I was going to cut you out."

"Yes, I heard that. Oh, I wasn't afraid, I expect you would have given me notice?"

"Ay! of course. Besides, it's better it should be you, because of the kid. It's what we've always said, haven't we, Lise?"

"Always; that's the gospel truth."

On the faces of all three of them were signs of emotion; they all fraternised together without jealousy. Jean, more especially, astonished that he should be eager for this marriage. And he ordered beer to be brought, Buteau having exclaimed that, so help him, they must really drink something more. With their arms on the table and Lise between them, they began to talk now of the recent rain which had beaten down the wheat.

But in the café, close by them, Jesus Christ, who was seated at a table with an old peasant as drunk as himself, was creating an intolerable uproar. All the company of blouses, moreover, who were drinking, smoking, and spitting in the reddish fumes of the lamps, were unable to speak without shouting; and his voice, metallic and stentorian, was heard above them all. He was playing at *chouine*, and a dispute had just broken out over the last trick, between him and his companion, who maintained that he had won with an air of tranquil obstinacy. However, he appeared to be in the wrong. It showed no signs of finishing. Jesus Christ in his wrath began to bellow so loudly that the host interfered. Then he got up and passed from one table to the other, showing his cards and submitting the hand to the other drinkers' judgment. He abused everybody. And he started shouting again, returned to the old man, who, supported by the injustice he had committed, turned a stoical face to his attacks.

"Coward! cheat! if you'll come out of that for a minute, I'll soon settle you!"

Then, suddenly, Jesus Christ resumed his seat in front of the other, and remarked placidly,—

"I know a game. You must bet, though—will you?"

He brought out a handful of five-franc pieces, fifteen or twenty of them, and disposed them in a single pile before him.

"That's it. You bring out the same number."

The old man, growing interested, took out his purse without a word, and raised a similar pile.

"Now, I take one off your heap, and—look!"

He seized the piece, set it on his tongue gravely, as though it were the Host, and with a sudden gulp swallowed it.

"It's your turn, take one off my heap. And the one who eats more than the other keeps 'em. That's the game."

The old man, with wide-open eyes, agreed, and with some difficulty he put away the first piece. Jesus Christ, however, crying out all the time that there was no hurry, gobbled up the coins as though they were plums. At the fifth, a murmur ran through the café, a group formed round them, petrified with admiration. The bugger! what a scorcher he was to stuff his gizzard with money like that! The old man was swallowing his fourth piece when he fell forward, his face purple, gasping and suffocating; for a moment they thought he was dead. Jesus Christ had risen, quite at his ease, he cast a bantering look round: for his part, he had ten in his stomach, that made always a win of thirty francs to carry away with him.

Buteau, growing uneasy, and fearing to be compromised if the old man did not pull through, had left the table; and as he looked at the walls with an absent expression, without speaking or settling up, although the invitation had come from him, Jean paid the bill. That gave the crowning touch to the dog's good humour. In the courtyard, when the horse was harnessed, he slapped the comrade's back.

"You know I must have you. The wedding will be in three weeks. I've been to the lawyer, I've signed the deed, all the papers will be ready."

And, helping Lise up into his trap:

"So, houp-la! I shall take you home. I can go by Rognes, it won't be out of my way."

Jean returned in his trap alone. It seemed to him natural, he followed behind them. Cloyes was asleep, it had fallen back into its condition of stagnant calm, lit only by the yellow

rays of the street lamps. Of the market's uproar nothing was now audible, unless it was the slow and stumbling step of some drunken peasant. Then the road stretched away in the darkness. He could just see the other vehicle, however, which was carrying the young couple. That was much better—yes, it was excellent. And he whistled merrily, refreshed by the night, feeling free and invaded by a sudden cheerfulness.

CHAPTER VII

It was still the haymaking season, beneath a blue and very warm sky, cooled by breezes; and the marriage had been fixed for St. John's Day, which fell this year upon a Saturday.

The Fouans had recommended Buteau to give the first invitation to La Grande, the head of the family. She had to be considered like some rich and redoubtable queen. So, one evening Buteau and Lise, both in their Sunday clothes, set out together to beg her to assist at the wedding, at the ceremony, and afterwards at the banquet which was to take place in the bride's house.

La Grande was knitting by herself in the kitchen, and without ceasing to ply her needles she looked at them fixedly; she left them to explain themselves, to repeat the same phrases three times. Then, in her shrill voice, she said:

"A wedding! No, no, not I! What should I do at a wedding? It is good for folk who care to amuse themselves."

They had seen her parchment-coloured face flush at the idea of this bean-feast which would cost her nothing, they were certain that she would accept; but it was an established custom that she required to be pressed.

"Now, Aunt, you know we can't get on without you."

"No, no, such things are not in my way. I haven't the time; I've nothing proper to wear. It's always an expense. I can live just as well without going to weddings."

They were obliged to repeat the invitation ten times before she ended by saying, with a gloomy air,—

"Very well, since you force me, I will come. But I wouldn't put myself out so for anyone else."

Then, seeing that they were not going just yet, a struggle went on within her, for it was customary under such circum-

stances to offer a glass of wine. She made up her mind at last, and went down to the cellar in spite of there being a bottle already broached in the kitchen. For she kept for use on such occasions a remnant of wine that had turned, which she could not drink herself, it was so sharp, and which she called "cousin-killer." She filled two glasses, and fixed her nephew and niece with a gaze so direct that they were obliged to swallow it without wincing for fear of offending her. They left her with their throats on fire.

The same evening Buteau and Lise called at "White Roses," upon the Charles. But there they fell into the thick of a tragical adventure.

M. Charles was in the garden in a state of great excitement. He had obviously been seized with some violent emotion just as he was pruning a climbing rose-bush, for he held his pruning scissors in his hand, and the ladder was still against the wall. He restrained himself, however, and conducted them to the drawing-room, where Élodie was doing embroidery with her modest air.

"So you are to be married in a week? That's right, young people. But we shall not be able to come; Madame Charles is at Châtres, and will be there for a fortnight."

He raised his heavy eye-lids to cast a glance at the young girl.

"Yes, in the busy season, at the big fairs, Madame Charles runs over to lend a hand to her daughter. You see, business is business; there are days when one is overwhelmed in the shop. Estelle has got into the way of the thing, but all the same her mother is a great help, especially as our son-in-law, Vaucogne, is none at all. . . . And then Madame Charles is pleased to see the house again. What would you expect? We've left thirty years of our life there: that makes a difference."

He was affected, his eyes were suffused with moisture, and vaguely turned yonder, towards the past. And it was true, his wife was often home-sick for the little house in the Rue aux Juifs, in the retirement of her respectability, so dainty and well

appointed, with its flowers and birds and sunshine. When she shut her eyes, she saw again ancient Châtres, straggling down the hill side from the Place de la Cathédrale to the banks of the Eure. She arrived, she skirted the Rue de la Pie, the Rue Porte-Cendreuse, then the Rue des Ecuyers, which was a short cut; she went down the Hill of Pied-Plat, and the last step brought her in sight of No. 19, at the corner of the Rue aux Juifs and the Rue de la Planche-aux-Carpes, with its white façade and its green *persiennes* that were always kept closed. The two streets were wretched. She had looked out for thirty years at their poor houses and their squalid inhabitants, and at the gutter in the centre running with dark-coloured waters. But what weeks and months she had stayed at home there, in the shade, without so much as crossing her threshold! Her pride had remained in the sofas and the mirrors in the reception-room, in the linen and mahogany of the bedrooms, in all the luxury and comfortable severity, their creation, their work, to which they owed fortune. A melancholy fit seized her with the recollection of certain intimate corners, of the persistent smell of toilet-waters —the special perfume of the whole house—which haunted her nostrils like a regret. So that she looked forward to the busy season, and went off rejuvenated and joyous after having taken two big kisses from her granddaughter, which she promised to pass on to her mother the same evening at the confectioner's shop.

" How vexatious, how vexatious! " repeated Buteau, genuinely, annoyed at the notion of not having the Charles. " What if the little cousin wrote aunt to come back? "

Élodie, who was nearly fifteen, raised her puffy white face surmounted by her few scanty hairs. Her blood was so poor that the fine, country air seemed only to render her more anæmic.

" Oh, no," she murmured; " gran'ma told me that the bonbons would keep her there for two weeks and more. She's going to bring me back a bag if I'm good."

It was a pious fiction. They brought her back, after each excursion, some sugar-plums, which her parents were supposed to have made.

"Well," suggested Lise, presently, "come without her, uncle! Bring the little one."

But M. Charles was no longer listening; his agitation had seized him again. He had gone to the window, and seemed to be watching someone, suppressing the anger which threatened to explode. Being unable to contain himself longer, he dismissed the young girl briefly:

"Go and play for a little, my pet."

Then, when she was gone, being accustomed to be sent away so when grown-up people wanted to talk, he took his stand in the centre of the room and folded his arms. His correct face, fat and yellow, like that of a retired magistrate, trembled with indignation.

"Will you believe it? Have you ever known such an abomination? . . . I was pruning my roses; I was on the top step of the ladder, and, absently, I looked over the other side: what do you suppose I saw? Honorine, yes! My maid, Honorine, with her legs in the air and a man on the top of her, doing their dirty tricks. The beasts, the beasts, against my wall!"

He choked, and began to walk up and down with noble gestures of malediction.

"I am waiting to turn her out of doors, the baggage, the wretched woman! We can't keep a single one. They all get in the family-way. At the end of six months it's an established thing; their bellies are impossible in a respectable family. And this one, who did her work well, and was honest! I'm sure the end of the world is at hand; debauchery no longer knows any bounds."

Buteau and Lise, in confusion, shared his indignation deferentially:

"To be sure, it's not proper; no, it's not proper."

Once more he came to a halt in front of them.

"And just imagine, if Élodie had climbed up that ladder, and discovered that. She, so innocent, who knows absolutely nothing, whose very thoughts we watch over. It makes me shudder, 'pon my word! What a shock for Madame Charles if she were here."

At that very minute, happening to glance into the garden, he saw the child, yielding to curiosity, with her foot on the first rung. He rushed forward, shouted to her in a voice choked with horror, as though he had seen her on the brink of a precipice:

"Élodie, Élodie! get down, go away, for the love of God!"

His legs failed him, he dropped into an arm-chair, and resumed his lamentations over the shamelessness of servant-girls. Hadn't he caught one of them at the end of the poultry-yard, showing the child how the chickens were made behind! He had enough bother, already, out of doors, to conceal from her the coarseness of the peasants and the cynicism of the animals; he would lose heart altogether if he was to find his own house a constant hot-bed of immorality.

"Here she is, coming in," he said suddenly. "Now you shall see."

He rang, and received Honorine, severely sitting, having by a great effort recovered his dignified calm.

"Pack up your trunk, mademoiselle, and be off at once. I will give you a week's wages."

The servant, a lean, sickly-looking girl, with a humble, shame-faced expression, wanted to explain, to stammer out excuses.

"It's useless, I do more than I ought by not handing you over to the authorities for an offence against decency."

Then she was up in arms.

"I suppose it was because we forgot to pay the door-keeper?"

He rose to his feet, tall and imposing, and dismissed her with an imperious gesture, his finger pointing to the door. Then, when she was gone, he relieved his feelings coarsely.

"To think of such a whore dishonouring my house!"

"To be sure she is one, yes, that she is," chorused Lise and Buteau, complacently.

And the latter went on:

"Well, it's agreed, uncle, you will come with the little one?"

M. Charles was still shuddering. He had gone to take a look at himself in the mirror, with an anxious movement, and he returned satisfied.

"Go—where? Ah, yes! to your wedding. I am very glad that you are going to be married, young people. Count upon me, I will come; but I can't promise to bring Élodie, because, you know at a wedding, things are allowed. . . . Ah, the bitch, I've got her out of the house at last. I won't let women make a fool of me. . . . Good day—you may depend on me."

The Delhommes, upon whom Buteau and Lise called next, accepted after the customary refusals and entreaties. None of the family remained to be asked except Jesus Christ. But really he was becoming unendurable; he quarrelled with everyone, and invented the foulest scandals to bring his family into disrepute. They decided to leave him out, although they trembled lest he should avenge himself by some infamous trick.

Rognes was in a state of expectation; it was quite an event—this marriage that had been so long postponed. Hourdequin, the mayor, put himself out for it; but being asked to come to the festivities in the evening, he had to excuse himself; he was obliged to sleep at Châtres that night, on account of a lawsuit. But he promised that Madame Jacqueline should come, as they had been kind enough to invite her. They thought at first of inviting the Abbé Godard, so that the company might be of the best. Only, after the first few words, the curé lost his temper, because they had fixed the ceremony for St. John's Day. He had a High Mass, a settled institution at Bazoches-le-Doyen; how did they suppose he was to get to Rognes that morning? But the women, Lise and Rose and Fanny, were obstinate; they abandoned the idea of an invitation; he had to give in. And

he arrived at noon, fuming to such an extent that he flung them their Mass in a fit of temper, and left them profoundly hurt at his conduct. For the rest, after some discussion, they had resolved to have a very quiet family wedding because of the bride's situation, with a child nearly three years old. However, they went to the pastry-cook's at Cloyes to order a pie and dessert, making up their minds to be lavish with this dessert in order to show how they could fling money about when there was occasion for it. They would have, just as they did at the wedding of Coquart's eldest daughter—he was the farmer of St. Juste—a raised cake, two custards, and four plates of confectionery and fancy biscuits. In the house they would have a thick soup, some chitterlings, four roast chickens, four stewed rabbits, some beef, and some roast veal. There should be enough for fifteen persons; they were ignorant of what the exact number would be. If anything was over from the evening they could finish it on the following day.

The sky, rather gloomy in the morning, had cleared up, and the day closed in a brightness and warmth that was like a good omen. They had laid a table, in the centre of the huge kitchen, facing the hearth and oven, where the meat was roasting and the sauces simmering. The fire made the room so hot that the two windows and the door were left wide open; and through them the pleasant smell of freshly-cut hay floated in.

Since the previous evening the Mouche girls had been helped by Rose and Fanny. At three o'clock, there was great excitement when the confectioner's cart appeared, bringing the women of the village to their doors. And at that moment La Grande arrived, before the time; she sat down, and stuck her cane between her legs, keeping her hard eyes fixed upon the eatables. Fancy such extravagance! She had taken nothing that morning, so that she might eat more when the evening came.

The men, Buteau, Jean, who had been his best man, old Fouan, Delhomme, who had brought his son Nénesse, all dressed in coats and black trousers, with tall silks hats, which they wore

all the time, were playing at bowls in the yard. M. Charles arrived by himself, having taken Élodie to her school at Châteaudun the day before; and without taking part in it he showed an interest in the game, and indulged in judicious comments.

But at six o'clock, when everything was ready, they had still to wait for Jacqueline. The women put their skirts down, which had been held up by pins so that the cooking should not soil them. Lise was in blue, Françoise in pink, in crudely-coloured old-fashioned silks that Lambordieu had sold them for twice their value as the latest novelties from Paris. Old Madame Fouan had brought out her dress of violet poplin, in which she had appeared at country weddings for the last forty years; and Fanny, dressed in green, wore all her jewels, her watch and chain, a brooch, rings, and ear-rings. Every minute one of the women would issue into the road, and run up to the corner of the church to see if the lady from the farm was not coming. The meat was spoiling, the thick soup that they had foolishly served up, was getting cold in the plates. At last there was a cry:

"There she is, there she is!"

And the gig drew up. Jacqueline jumped down lightly. She looked charming, having had the good taste to depend merely on her prettiness, and come in a simple cotton gown, white, with pink spots. And she wore no jewels, her flesh was unadorned except for some diamonds in her ears, a present from Hourdequin, which had revolutionized all the farms in the neighbourhood. They were surprised that she did not dismiss the man who had brought her, after they had helped him put up the trap. His name was Tron, and he was a kind of giant, with a fair skin, red hair, and an infantile expression. He came from Perche, and had been at La Boderie for a fortnight as man of all work.

"Tron will stay, you know," she said, merrily. "He will take me home."

In Beauce they had little love for the Percherons, accusing them of being treacherous and sly. They looked at each other.

Was this La Cognette's latest, this huge animal? Buteau, who was very bland and in high spirits since the morning, answered:

"Of course he'll stay! It's enough that he's come with you."

Lise having asked them to set to, they went to table with a great bustle and clatter of tongues. There were three chairs lacking; they ran and fetched two stools with the straw seats broken, over which they laid a plank. The spoons were already tapping against the bottom of the plates. The soup was cold, covered with curdling islets of grease. That was of no consequence, as old Fouan suggested, it would get warm again in their bellies, a remark which excited a storm of laughter. Then the massacre began, a revel of gluttony: fowls, rabbits, meat succeeded each other and vanished away to the sound of a terrific movement of jaws. Abstemious enough at home, they laid up tortures of indigestion when they went out. La Grande did not speak at all that she might eat the more; she went along steadily, pounding her jaws unceasingly; and it was astonishing what her octogenarian body, dry and withered as it was, could engulf without perceptibly swelling. It had been arranged that Françoise and Fanny should attend to the waiting out of civility, so that the bride need not get up. But the latter was unable to keep still, and jumped up every minute and tucked up her sleeves, intent on pouring out a sauce or taking off a roast. After a little while, indeed, the whole table assisted; someone was always getting up to cut some bread, or try and secure a particular dish. Buteau, who had undertaken the wine, was not sufficient; he had had the foresight to avoid wasting time corking and uncorking bottles, by simply broaching a cask; only even then they did not let him eat. It became necessary for Jean to relieve him by taking a turn at filling the pots. Delhomme, sitting squarely, declared with his wise air that they must have liquor if they didn't want to choke. When the tart was brought in, as big as a cart-wheel, people contemplated it devoutly; and the small pies produced an impression. M. Charles carried his politeness so far as to declare, upon his honour, he had never

seen a finer one at Châtres. Suddenly, Daddy Fouan, who was in fine form, made another joke.

"I say, if one was to clap that on the buttocks it 'ud cure the piles."

The table was convulsed; Jacqueline, especially, laughed till the tears came to her eyes. She gasped out additional witticisms, which were lost in the laughter. The wedded pair were placed opposite each other, Buteau between his mother and La Grande, Lise between Daddy Fouan and M. Charles. The other guests sat where they pleased, Jacqueline by the side of Tron, who doted upon her with his mild, stupid eyes; Jean near Françoise, only separated from her by little Jules, over whom they had both promised to watch, but as soon as the tart arrived he was seized with a bad attack of indigestion, and the bride had to put the child to bed. So it happened that Jean and Françoise finished their dinner side by side. She was perpetually on her legs, flushed from the big fire in the grate, and worn out with fatigue and over-excitement. In his eagerness he would often have risen to save her, but she prevented him. She was, moreover, in constant conflict with Buteau, who, in his moods of amiability, liked to plague people and who had been baiting her since the beginning of the meal. He pinched her whenever she passed, and she retorted wrathfully with a push. Then she got up again under some pretext or other, as though there were some fascination in being pinched again and in retaliating. She complained that her thighs were black and blue.

"Sit still, then!" Jean repeated.

"Oh, no!" she cried, "he mustn't think he's my man too, because he's married Lise."

With the approach of night they had lit six candles. For three hours they had been eating, when at last, at about ten o'clock, they fell upon the dessert; and thenceforward they were drinking coffee—not one cup, or two, but big basins of it—all the time. The jokes grew broader. Coffee was stimulating, they said; excellent for men who slept too hard; and every time

one of the married guests took a mouthful of it, they split their sides with laughter.

"I'm sure you need to drink a lot of it," remarked Fanny to Delhomme, laughingly, throwing aside her ordinary reserve.

He blushed, and excused himself deliberately on the ground of his being overworked; whilst their son Nénesse, with his mouth wide open, laughed to the general accompaniment of shouts and slaps on the thighs produced by this piece of conjugal confidence. The youngster, however, had eaten so much that he was like to burst out of his skin. He disappeared, and was only found when people were leaving, asleep with the two cows. La Grande was still the person who held out the longest. At midnight she had fastened on the fancy biscuits with a sort of dumb despair at being unable to finish them. They had wiped the bowls of custard clean, and swept up the crumbs of the raised cake. And in the abandonment of their growing intoxication, their bodices came unfastened, and they undid the buckles of their breeches, then changed places, and talked in little groups round the table, which was spotted with grease from the sauces and stained with wine. Some attempts at song had been unsuccessful; old Rose alone was left quavering a wicked stave of the last century, a reminiscence of her youth, to which her nodding head beat time. There were not enough of them to dance, the men preferred to empty the brandy bottles and smoke their pipes, which they knocked upon the table cloth to get the plugs out. In one corner Fanny and Delhomme, with Jean and Tron, totted up to within a halfpenny the financial position of the young couple, and discounted their expectations. This was an interminable task, each square foot of land was valued; they knew the fortunes of everybody in Rognes, even to the figure which was represented by the household linen. At the other end Jacqueline had got hold of M. Charles, and was contemplating him with an irresistible smile, her pretty perverse eyes on fire with curiosity. She questioned him:

"So, it's nice—Châtres? One can amuse one's self there?"

He answered her with a panegyric of the "curiosities of the town," of the succession of avenues planted with ancient trees, which make a rampart of shade round Châtres. Lower down, more especially along the Eure, the boulevards were delightfully cool in summer. Then there was the Cathedral; he enlarged upon the Cathedral, showed himself well informed, and respectful towards religion. Yes, it was one of our most superb monuments, though it had become too vast now for our age of luke-warm Christianity, and was almost always empty in the midst of its deserted close, which was only traversed on week-days by the shadows of pious women. Its immense ruined sadness had come over him one Sunday, when he had entered as he was passing by, when Vespers were being said. It made one shiver, one could only see dimly, on account of the stained glass, so that he had to get accustomed to the darkness before he could distinguish two schools of little girls, who were lost there, like a handful of ants, singing with shrill piping voices beneath the vaulted arches. Ah, really, it gave one the heart-ache to think of people giving up the churches so for the wine-shops! Jacqueline, astonished, continued to watch him intently with her smile. At last she whispered:

"But tell me—the women at Châtres. . . ."

He understood, grew very grave, unbosomed himself, however, catching the infection of the pervading drunkenness. She, rather flushed and rippling out little laughs, pressed closer to him, as though to enter so more easily into the mystery of this inrush of men every evening. But it was not what she believed, he explained to her how hard and laborious it was; for when he was in drink he grew melancholy and paternal. He became more animated when she told how she had amused herself by going to look at the house at Châteaudun, at the junction of the Rue Davignon and the Rue Louiseau, a little tumble-down house, with the shutters closed and half-rotted away. Behind, in a

neglected garden, a big globe of silvered glass reflected the façade of the house, whilst in front of the skylight at the summit, which had been turned into a dove-cote, pigeons were fluttering and cooing in the sun. On that day there were children playing on the steps, and she could hear the words of command over the wall of the adjoining cavalry barracks. He interrupted her with signs of irritation. Oh, he knew the place! They kept two disgusting women—regular old hacks; they hadn't even mirrors downstairs. That was the kind of kennel which brought the profession into disrepute.

"But what can you expect in a *sous-préfecture?*" he said at last, growing calmer, subsiding into the tolerant philosophy of the superior man.

It was one o'clock in the morning; people were talking of going to bed. When a couple had had a child already, it was useless—wasn't it?—to make any fuss about bedding them. It was ridiculous to get hairs to tickle them, or pull off the sheets and put in those toys that squeak when you press them. All that would be in their case like taking the mustard after the meat. The best plan would be to have a parting glass and then say good-night.

At that moment Fanny and Lise gave a scream. Through the open window some filth was violently thrown into the room, a handful of excrement picked up from under a hedge. The ladies' dresses were ruined, spattered from top to bottom. What dirty beast had done that? They ran and looked out on the square, up the road, behind the wall. There was nobody. But they were all agreed; it was Jesus Christ's revenge for not having been invited.

The Fouans and the Delhommes went off, and M. Charles as well. La Grande made a tour round the table to see if nothing was left; then she made up her mind to go, having first remarked to Jean that the Buteaus would die without a bed to lie in. They heard her hard, firm footsteps fade away along the road with the little regular taps of her stick, whilst

the others, who were very drunk, were stumbling over the stones. Tron harnessed the gig for Madame Jacqueline, and she looked round as she stood upon the step.

"Are you coming back with us, Jean? . . . I suppose not."

The young man, who was about to climb in, thought better of it; he was glad to leave her to the comrade. He watched her as she settled herself closely against the big form of her new lover; he could not restrain a laugh when the trap was out of sight. He made up his mind to walk home; and he came and sat down for a moment on the stone bench beside Françoise who had sunk down there, worn out with heat and fatigue, waiting until the company were gone. The Buteaus were already in their room; she had promised to lock up before going to bed herself.

"Oh, isn't it nice here!" she sighed, after five minutes of profound silence.

And the silence began again, supremely peaceful. The night was riddled with stars, cool and delicious. The smell of the hay was wafted up so strongly from the meadows by the Aigre that it embalmed the air as if it had been the scent of wild flowers.

"Yes, it's nice," repeated Jean presently. "It puts a heart into one."

She made no response, and he noticed that she was asleep. She drooped over, and her head rested on his shoulder. And so he stayed for another hour, thinking of confused things. Evil thoughts invaded him, and then faded away. She was too young; it seemed to him, that if he waited, she only would be growing older, and would come nearer to him.

"Look here, Françoise, you must get to bed. This may be bad for you." She awoke with a start.

"Well, it's true, I shall be better in bed. Good-night, Jean!"

"Good-night, Françoise!"

PART THREE

CHAPTER I

Buteau had hold of it at last then, his share of the earth, coveted so hotly, which he had refused for two years and a half in a fury of mingled desire and obstinacy and irritation. He, himself, could not have told why he had held out so long; he had longed secretly to sign the deed, but he had been afraid of being tricked, and inconsolable at not having the whole inheritance, the nineteen acres, which to-day were mutilated and divided. Since he had accepted it it was like the satisfaction of a great passion, he felt the brutal joy of possession, and one circumstance doubled his delight, the notion that his brother and his sister were cheated, that his share was worth more now that the new road skirted his field. He never met them without a sneer of cunning, saying, as he winked his eye:

"Anyhow, I've got the better of them."

And that was not all. He gained as well by his marriage, so long postponed, the two hectares which Lise brought him, and which joined his own field. For the thought of the division, which was necessary between the two sisters, never came to him; or, at least, he saw it at a date so remote that he hoped in the course of time to discover the means of evading it. He had, including Françoise's share, eight acres of arable land, four of pasture, and about two and a half of vineyard; and he would keep them, he would sooner part with a limb; above all he would keep tight hold of the Cornailles land by the side of the road; it now extended over nearly three hectares. Neither his brother nor his sister owned anything equal to it; he spoke of it with his cheeks puffed out, ready to burst with pride.

A year passed, and that first year of possession was an exquisite pleasure to Buteau. At no period when he had laboured for others had he ploughed the land so deeply or so thoroughly. It was his own; he would pierce it, fertilize it to the womb.

At evening he came home, worn out, with his plough-share which shone like silver. In March he harrowed his wheat, in April his oats, multiplying his cares, giving himself up to them utterly. When the fields required no further labour, he went back to look at them like a lover. He made a tour of them, stooped down, and with his favourite gesture picked up a handful of soil, a rich clod, which he loved to crumble and dribble through his fingers, happy above all when he could feel that it was neither too dry nor too moist, and he foretold the fine bread which should come from it.

And so, La Beauce stretched out in its verdant expanse before him, from November to July, from the moment when the first green shoots peeped from the earth to the time when the tall stalks were golden. He wanted to have it there, before his eyes, without leaving the house; he unblocked the kitchen window, the one at the back which faced the plain. When he stood there he saw ten leagues of country, a huge, bare expanse, spreading beneath the vaulted sky. There was not a tree, only the telegraph posts on the road from Châteaudun to Orléans, ranging away till they were lost to sight.

At first in the great plots of dark earth there was only a faint green shadow, fringing the soil, that was hardly visible. Then this tender green was more clearly defined in patches of green velvet of an almost uniform tone. Then the blades grew taller and thicker; each growth had its particular shade; he could distinguish from afar the yellowish green of the wheat, the blue-green of the oats, the sombre green of the rye, field upon field disposed in every pattern, between the red patches of crimson clover. It is at such a time that La Beauce is beautiful, in the youth of the year, clad in her spring garments, level and soothing to the eyes in her monotony. The stems

were still growing; and it was like a sea, a sea of cereals, rolling away boundless and immense. In the morning, in fine weather, a pink mist came up.

As the sun rose in the clear air a breeze sprung up and blew with great regular gusts, causing a swell to pass over the fields, starting from the horizon, prolonging itself until it died away at the other end. An undulation softened down the tones, flakes of old gold ran along the length of the wheat, the oats took a blue tint, whilst the quivering rye showed violet reflections. One wave succeeded another ceaselessly; the eternal growth went on beneath the wind from the infinite. When evening fell, the fronts of distant houses, brightly illuminated, were like white sails; the points of steeples rose like masts from the billows of earth. It grew cold; the darkness heightened the moist and murmuring sensation of the open sea; the outlines of a distant wood grew vague enough to suggest the faint blur of a continent.

In bad weather, too, Buteau looked out, just as a fisherman watches from his cottage the tumultuous sea when a gale prevents him earning his bread. He saw one furious storm from there; a black cloud which cast a livid shadow, flashes of red lightning tinging the blades of grass, between thunder-claps. He saw from there, a water-spout moving up from over six leagues off, at first it was a thin drab cloud, twisted like a cord, then it was a tearing column, rushing on with the gallop of some monster; then behind it was a ruin of crops, a razed track, three kilomètres wide, all trampled down, destroyed and broken. His fields had not suffered; he went about pitying other peoples' misfortunes, with secret outbursts of joy. And the higher the wheat grew, the greater was his pleasure. Already, the gray islet of a village had faded from the horizon, hidden behind the growing expanse of verdure. Only the roofs of La Borderie were left to be submerged in their turn later on. A windmill with its extended arms was left alone, like a wreck. It was wheat everywhere, a sea of wheat, spreading out in triumph, covering the earth with its green immensity.

"S'truth!" he said each evening as he sat down at table, "if the summer is not too dry, we shall still earn our bread."

In the Buteaus' house they had settled down. The married couple had taken the big room below, and Françoise had contented herself with the little room upstairs, once occupied by Mouche, her father. It had been cleaned, and furnished with a bed of sacking, an old chest of drawers, a table and two chairs. She busied herself with the cows, and lived her life as of old. Nevertheless, beneath their repose a cause of dissension lay dormant—the question of partition between the sisters, which had been left in suspense. The day after the elder girl's marriage, old Fouan, who was the guardian of the younger, had insisted that the division should take place to avoid trouble later. But Buteau had loudly protested. What was the good? Françoise was too young, she had no use for her land. Was anything changed, moreover? She lived with her sister as before, she was provided with food and clothes. Surely there was nothing she could complain of? At all these reasons the old man shook his head: no one knew what might happen; it was best to do things regularly. And the young girl herself demanded it, wished to have her share settled: afterwards she would leave it in the care of her brother-in-law. The latter, however, had got his way by the use of a rough good-humour, a laughing obstinacy. They dropped the subject; he boasted everywhere of the advantage of living so in a pleasant family circle.

"A good understanding, there's nothing like that!"

In effect, after a lapse of ten months, there had been no quarrel between the two sisters nor in the family, but the situation had gradually spoiled. It began with fits of bad temper. There was sulking, and bitter words followed; beneath it the canker of "thine" and "mine" pursued its ravages and ate away their kindness little by little.

Certainly, Lise and Françoise no longer felt for each their old adoring tenderness. No one ever met them now with their arms round each other's waists, the same shawl covering them

when they took their walk at nightfall. It was as though they had been separated; a growing coolness came between them. As soon as a man was there, it seemed to Françoise that her sister had been taken from her. She who hitherto had shared with Lise in all things did not share this man. And so he had become the foreign substance, the obstacle that barred her heart, with which she lived alone. She went off without kissing her elder sister now that Buteau kissed her, feeling hurt, as though some one had drunk out of her glass. In questions of property she retained her childish notions, bringing an extraordinary passion to it. This is mine, that is yours, and since her sister was henceforward another's, she left her, but she wished to have what was her own—a moiety of the land and house. For this bitterness of Françoise's there was another cause which she could not have expressed herself. Hitherto the house, devoid of love-making, with the chill of their father Mouche's widowhood upon it, had contained no troublous breath for her. And now there was a male inhabiting it—a brutal male, used to trussing girls in empty ditches, whose coarse games made the walls shake and filtered in through the chinks in the wainscot. She was ignorant of nothing; the animals had instructed her, and her knowledge filled her with wrath and disgust. In the day time she preferred to go out so that they could do their dirty tricks at their ease. In the evening, if they began to laugh as they got up from table, she cried to them to wait at least until she had finished washing-up. And she gained her chamber and slammed the door furiously, gasping out abusive epithets. "The pigs! the pigs!" In spite of all, she thought she could hear what was passing underneath. She buried her face in the pillow and dragged the sheet over her ears, but she burned with fever, and sight and hearing were haunted with hallucinations; she was torn by the revolt of her puberty. The worst of it was that Buteau, seeing her so occupied with this, made a joke of it and chaffed her. Well? What then? What would she say when her turn came to do it? Lise also laughed, finding no harm

in the thing. And then he explained his notions of the business. Since the good Lord had given everybody this pleasure, which cost nothing, it was permissible to get as much of it as one could —to live up to one's neck in it. But no children! Ah, no, there was to be no more of that! One made a sight too many in one's folly before one was married. There was Jules—a blasted surprise he was, all the same—whom he had to put up with. But when one got married, one became serious; he would sooner be cut in two than begin to make another. No thanks! To have another mouth in the house to feed, when bread was short enough already. So he kept his eyes open, and watched himself with his wife; she was so fat, the bitch, that she would catch the thing in a jiffy, he said; adding, with a laugh, that he ploughed well but he didn't sow. Wheat, wheat, as much as the swelling womb of the earth could bear him, but he had done for good with getting kids.

And in the midst of these incessant details, these copulations, which she felt in the air around her, Françoise's trouble grew heavier. They protested that her character was spoiling; and indeed she had inexplicable fits of temper; she leapt from mood to mood, was now sad now merry, then crabbed and surly. In the morning she threw black looks at Buteau, when, without minding her, he crossed the kitchen in semi-nudity. Quarrels broke out between her sister and herself over a cup she had broken. Wasn't the cup hers too, half of it, at least? Wasn't she free to smash the half of everything if it amused her? Upon this question of property the disputes grew sharp and keen, and left a bitterness which lasted some days.

About this time Buteau was seized himself with a fit of savage temper. The earth was suffering from a terrible drought; not a drop of rain had fallen for six weeks, and he came in, clenching his fists, sick at seeing the harvest in jeopardy, the rye stunted in its growth, the oats thin, the wheat itself parched up before the ears had come. It made him suffer with the actual suffering of the crops; it confined his stomach, doubled up his

limbs with cramp, made him shrink and wither up with sickness and wrath. So, one morning, for the first time he fell out with Françoise. It was very hot, he had left his shirt open, his breeches unbuttoned, almost tumbling off him, after having a wash at the spring; and, as he sat down to drink his soup, Françoise, who was serving him, passed behind him for a minute. She grew scarlet and burst out:

"I say, tuck your shirt in, it's disgusting."

He was in a nasty mood, he lost his temper.

"God's truth, will you stop nagging at me? Don't look if you don't like it. . . . I suppose you'd like a taste of it, you dirty slut, that you're always poking your nose in!"

She was still blushing, began to stammer, when Lise made the mistake of adding:

"He's right, you'll end by making yourself a nuisance. You'd better be off, if we're not to do as we like in our own house."

"That's so, I *will* be off," said Françoise, furiously, going out and banging the door.

But the next day Buteau had grown bland again, was conciliatory and facetious. During the night, the sky had clouded over; for twelve hours a fine, warm, penetrating rain had been falling, one of those summer rains which give the country a new lease of life. And he had opened the window facing the plain, and was there at daybreak, watching the down-pour radiantly, his hands in his pockets, remarking:

"We're going to be gentlefolks soon, if the good Lord helps us like this. Blast me! if days spent like this, doing nought, aren't worth more than them one sweats away on for no good."

Slow and soft and incessant, the rain poured down unceasingly; and he heard La Beauce drinking it—riverless, springless Beauce—whose face it transformed. There was a deep murmur, the comfortable noise of a great thirst being satisfied. The wheat recovered its youthful healthiness; it stood upright and firm, lifting the ears aloft, which would presently swell out and wax lusty, drooping with their weight of corn. And he, like

the earth, like the wheat, drank through every pore, leant out to be refreshed and cured, came again and again to the window to shout:

"Just come and look! It's raining five-franc pieces!"

Suddenly he heard the front door open; he looked round, and was astonished to recognize old Fouan.

"What! Father! Have you been out catching frogs?"

The old man, after struggling with a big blue umbrella, came in, leaving his sabots outside.

"It's a famous shower this," he said, simply; "we wanted it."

For a year, since the partition had been definitely completed, signed, and registered, his one occupation had been to go and look at his former fields. He was always to be met wandering round them, intensely interested, dull or gay, according to the condition of the crops, and grumbling against his children because it was no longer as it once was, and if things went wrong it was their fault.

"So you dropped in to see us as you went by?" went on Buteau.

Françoise, who had been silent hitherto, came forward, and said in a distinct voice:

"No, I asked uncle to come round."

Lise, who was standing in front of the table busy shelling peas, left her work, and waited with her arms hanging down and her face suddenly grown hard. Buteau, who had clenched his fists at first, resumed his laughing air, determined to keep his temper.

"Yes," explained the old man, slowly, "the little one had a talk with me yesterday. You see I was right when I wanted the thing settled right off. Let everybody have their share, there's no dispute about that; on the contrary, it prevents disputes. And now there must be an end of it. It's her right, isn't it, to have what's coming to her settled? As for me, I should be to blame. . . . Come now, let's fix a day, and we will go and see Monsieur Baillehache together."

But Lise could contain herself no longer.

"Why doesn't she put the police on us? One would think we were blasted robbers! . . . I don't go about telling folk what *she* is—a shitty stick, that you don't know which end to take hold of!"

Françoise was about to reply in the same tone, when Buteau, who had caught her playfully from behind, cried:

"That's all rot! We may nag sometimes, but we're good friends all the same, ain't we? That would be a fine thing, if sisters couldn't agree."

The young girl had shaken herself free, and the quarrel was about to break out again when he gave a pleased exclamation as the door was once more opened.

"Jean! Ah, what! dripping like a drowned rat!"

In effect it was Jean, who had run up from the farm, as it often happened, and had only thrown a sack over his shoulders to protect him; and he was soaked, dripping and steaming, and laughing at himself good naturedly. Whilst he shook himself, Buteau went back to the window, growing more and more ecstatic as the rain persisted.

"Oh, it's pouring, pouring! Oh, what a blessed thing! No, really now, ain't it famous to see it pour like that?"

Then, coming back again:

"You're here in the nick of time. Those two were just devouring each other. Françoise wants the division made so as she can leave us."

"What! the youngster?" cried Jean, in consternation.

His desire had become a violent passion, which he kept secret; and he had no other satisfaction than that of seeing her here in this house, where he was received as a friend. A score of times already he would have asked her in marriage if he had not felt himself so old in contrast with her youth. It was all very well to wait, but the fifteen years of difference showed no signs of erasure. No one seemed to suspect that he was thinking of her—neither she herself, nor her sister, nor her

brother-in-law. That was why the latter welcomed him so heartily, without fear of consequences.

"Youngster! ah, it's the right word!" he said, with a paternal shrug of his shoulders.

But Françoise, stiff, with her eyes fixed on the ground, insisted:

"I want my share."

"It would be the better plan," murmured old Fouan.

Then Jean took her gently by the wrists, and drew her against his knees; and he held her so, his hands trembling at the touch of her skin; he spoke to her in his pleasant voice, which took a new intonation when he entreated her to remain. Where would she go? To strangers, to service, at Cloyes or Châteaudun? Wouldn't she be better off in this house, where she had grown up, with the people who loved her? She listened to him, was moved in her turn, for if she never thought of him in the light of a lover, she was accustomed to let herself be guided by him, from affection chiefly, and a little from fear, for she thought him very grave.

"I want my share," she repeated, but less stubbornly, "only I don't say that I will go away."

"Well, silly," interrupted Buteau, "what will you do with your share, if you stay? You have everything, just like your sister and me. What do you want with half? No, you'll kill me with laughter! . . . Listen! The day you marry, we'll make the division."

Jean's eyes, which had been fixed upon her, wavered, as though his heart failed him.

"Do you hear? The day of your marriage."

She seemed ill at ease, made no response.

"And now, my little Françoise, go and kiss your sister: that's the best way."

Lise, whose disposition was not yet wholly bad, who retained her plump, gossiping gaiety, shed tears when Françoise hung round her neck. Buteau, delighted at having postponed the set-

tlement, cried, " S'help me, they must have a wet." He brought out five glasses, uncorked a bottle, then went and fetched a second one. All drank, women as well as men, the health of everybody present.

" Wine is good," cried Buteau, setting down his glass roughly; " yes, you can say what you like, but it's not worth this water that's tumbling down. Just look at it, still pouring, more and more. Oh, it's famous! " And all, in a crowd before the window, beamed with a sort of religious ecstasy as they watched the rain rustling down warm and soft and inexhaustible, as though beneath the kindly water they could see the great green corn growing.

CHAPTER II

One day, in the course of that summer, old Rose, who had been growing very weak and whose legs failed her, sent for her great-niece Palmyre to clean the house. Fouan had gone out to roam about his fields after his wont; and while the wretched woman on her knees, drenched in water, wore herself out with scrubbing, the other followed her round. They both hashed up the same old stories.

To begin with, they spoke of Palmyre's trouble; her brother Hilarion had taken to beating her. Yes, the idiot, the weakling had become vicious! and as he was ignorant of his own strength, with his fists that were capable of smashing stones, she was in constant fear of being murdered when he laid hands upon her. But she would allow no one to interfere, and sent people away who tried to make peace, so infinite was her kindness to him. Last week there had been a scandal of which all Roques was still talking; such a fearful beating that the neighbours had rushed in, and found him committing an abominable outrage on her.

"Tell me, girl," asked Rose, to entice her confidences, "is it true that the brute tried to force you?"

Palmyre stopped her scrubbing; she sat back in her dripping rags, seemed displeased, and ignored the question.

"What business is it of theirs—other people's? Why need they come and spy on us? We cheat nobody."

"Lord!" went on the old woman, "but if you go to bed together, as they tell, it's very wrong."

For a moment the unhappy woman was silent, with her suffering face, her eyes looking out vaguely, then, once more bending herself double, she broke out confusedly, breaking each sentence with the to-and-fro action of her skinny arms.

"Oh! very wrong, how can we tell? . . . The curé has led me to ask that by telling me that we shall go to hell. Not the poor dear lad, at any rate . . . an innocent, your Reverence, I told him, a lad who doesn't know more than a baby three weeks old, who would be dead now if I hadn't brought him up, and who's never known any happiness in being alive! . . . As for me—well, that's my look-out. The day when he throttles me in one of the fits of madness that seize him nowadays I shall find out whether the good Lord will have mercy on me."

Rose, who had known the truth for a long time, finding that she would learn no fresh details, concluded with a wise air:

"When things happen one way, it's no good wishing 'em different. . . . All the same, it's an awful life you've made for yourself, my girl!"

And she went on to complain how everybody had their own troubles. What anxiety, for instance, she and her man had undergone since they had despoiled themselves for the sake of their children, in sheer kindness of heart! Thereupon she could no longer stop herself. It was the eternal motive of her lamentations.

"Lord! Lord! As for consideration, one got used to do without that. When your children are pigs, pigs they'll be. . . . If only they paid the annuity. . . ."

She explained for the twentieth time how Delhomme was the only one who brought the fifty francs for the quarter, oh, yes—to the minute. Buteau was always behindhand and trying to beat them down. Now, although the time had been up ten days ago, she was still waiting for him; this very evening he had promised to come and pay what was due. As for Jesus Christ, with him it was simpler, he did not pay at all, they had never seen the colour of his money. And only that morning he had the cheek to send Slutty round; she had begun to snivel and ask for a loan of five francs to make a broth for her father, who was ill. Yes, they knew what his complaint was: his fine, thirsty throat! So they had given the little slut a warm reception, and

made her tell her father that if he didn't bring his fifty francs that evening, like his brother Buteau, they would send the broker to him.

"It was just to give him a fright, for the poor fellow isn't bad-hearted after all," added Rose, with a touch of compunction already, such was her preference for her eldest son.

At nightfall, Fouan having come home to sup, she began again at table, while he ate on, dumbly, with his head bowed.

Was it credible, in God's name, that of their six hundred francs, they had only received the two hundred from Delhomme, barely a hundred francs from Buteau, and nothing at all from Jesus Christ—just half what was due to them! And the scoundrels had signed the agreement at the lawyer's; it was written down and registered in the court. A lot they cared for justice!

Palmyre, who was finishing drying the kitchen tiles in the dark, answered each lamentation with the same phrase, like a melancholy chorus.

"Ah! to be sure, each one dies of his own trouble."

Rose made up her mind to light up finally, La Grande having come in with her knitting. Now the days were long, there were no more *up-sittings;* but to save using so much as a candle-end, she came to pass an hour with her brother at nightfall, before she groped her way to bed in the dark. She settled herself at once, and Palmyre, who had still some pots and pans to scour, repressed her breathing, in her fright at seeing her grandmother.

"If you want hot water, my girl," said Rose, "light a faggot."

She restrained herself for a moment, and tried to speak of other things; for before La Grande the Fouans refrained from complaining, knowing that it delighted her when they openly regretted their abdication. But her bitterness carried her away.

"Go on, put on the whole faggot, if you can call it a faggot. It's sprigs of rotten wood, clippings from the hedges. . . . I really think Fanny must pick out the scrapings of her wood-shed to send us such rubbish."

Fouan, who was still at table, with a full glass in front of him, broke the silence, in which it seemed as though he wished to bury himself.

"In God's name, dry up, you and your faggot! It's filth, we know that! What do you suppose I think of this pig-wash and vinegar that Delhomme gives me for wine?"

He raised his glass, and considered it in the candle-light.

"Ugh! What bloody stuff has he put in it? It's not even the rinsings of the cask. And he's straight, he is! The other two would see us die of thirst before they 'ud fetch us a bottle of water from the river."

Then he decided to drink his wine at a draught. But he spat angrily.

"What poison! I suppose his plan is to corpse me right away."

After this, Fouan and Rose gave a free rein to their rancour without making any more bones about it. They relieved their lacerated feelings in alternate litanies of recrimination, each telling their wrongs in turn. For instance, the ten litres of milk a week; to begin with, they never got more than six; and then if it didn't go through the hands of his Reverence, that milk could be good Christian milk all the same. It was the same with the eggs, they must have ordered them expressly from the fowls, for you might search Cloyes market through and never find such little ones. Yes, they were quite curiosities; and they were given so grudgingly that they had time to go bad on the way. As for the cheeses, oh, those cheeses! Rose was bent double with the gripe whenever she touched them. She ran to fetch one, insisted on Palmyre tasting it. Well, wasn't it awful? Didn't it cry out for vengeance? They must have put plaster in it, not to speak of flour. Already Fouan was bewailing himself at being allowed to smoke only a halfp'orth of tobacco every day, and it had taken her as short a time to regret her black coffee, which had been suppressed. And both together accused their children of the death of the old dog,

whom they had brought themselves to drown the day before, because nowadays he cost them too much."

"I've given them everything," cried the old man, "and the buggers bloody well laugh at me. Oh, it will kill us, it makes us mad at being brought so low."

They paused at last, and La Grande, who had kept her lips tightly compressed, looked first at one and then at the other, with her round eyes like a wicked bird's.

"You're well served out," she said.

But at this moment Buteau entered. Palmyre, who had finished her work, took the opportunity to escape with the fifteen sous that Rose had just put in her hand. And Buteau remained standing, motionless, in the middle of the room. He kept that cautious silence of rustics who never like to be the first to speak. Two minutes elapsed. The father was the first to broach the matter.

"So you've come at last; it's lucky. You've made us wait ten days."

The other looked loutish.

"One comes when one can. Everyone knows best himself how his bread is baked."

"Very likely; but if things went by that rule here we should be starving while you're eating the bread. . . . You've signed the agreement, you ought to pay at the proper day and hour."

Seeing his father to be growing wroth, Buteau began to joke.

"All right, if I'm too late I can go back again. I'm none too fond of paying already. There are some who don't pay at all."

The allusion to Jesus Christ troubled Rose. She ventured to pluck her man by the coat. He repressed a movement of anger, resumed:—

"Good, then; give me the fifty francs! I've got a receipt ready."

Buteau fumbled in his pockets without hurrying himself. He had cast a glance of resentment at La Grande, as though her

presence annoyed him. She put down her knitting and watched him with her bead-like eyes, eager to see the money. The father and mother had both drawn near without ceasing to follow the young man's hand, and beneath these three pairs of eyes, so widely opened, he grudgingly brought out the first five-franc piece.

"One," he said, laying it on the table.

The others watched him, as with an increasing slowness he proceeded reckoning aloud with a voice that languished. After the fifth he halted. He was obliged to make a desperate search to find one more. Then he cried with a strengthened voice very loudly,—

"And six!"

The Fouans waited still, but nothing more came.

"What six?" the father said, at last. "It's ten I want. Are you making sport of us? It's forty francs from last quarter, and thirty for this."

Buteau suddenly put on a complaining tone. Nothing went right. The price of wheat was still going down, the oats were poor, even his horse had started a swelling in its belly, so that he had been obliged to send twice for the veterinary. In short, he was ruined, he couldn't make both ends meet.

"That's no concern of mine," repeated the old man, violently. "Give me the fifty francs, or I'll have the law on you."

However, he grew calmer at the thought of accepting the thirty francs on account; and he spoke of writing a fresh receipt.

"Well, you must pay me the twenty francs next week. I shall put that on the paper."

But already, with a prompt hand, Buteau had snatched his money from the table.

"No, no, none of that! I must be quit with you. Give me the receipt, or I'm off. Dear me, no, it wouldn't be worth robbing myself for you, if I was still to be in your debt."

And it was terrible; father and son stuck out obstinately, repeating the same things unweariedly. One was furious at not having pocketed the money at once, the other determined not to part with it, unless it wiped out the score.

Once more the mother had to pluck her man by the sleeve, and once more he yielded.

"Well, blasted thief that you are, here's the paper! I ought to smash your jaw for you. Give me the money."

The exchange took place, from hand to hand; and Buteau, having played his part successfully, began to laugh. He went off with bland satisfaction, bidding good-night to the company. Fouan had resumed his seat, with an air of exhaustion, at the table. Then La Grande, before she began her knitting again, shrugged her shoulders, and flung these two words at him violently:

"Bloody fool!"

They were silent again, and the door was once more opened. Jesus Christ came in. Slutty had informed him that his brother was to pay that evening; he had spied him from the road, and waited until he came out, before presenting himself in his turn.

His face was mild, and he was gently lachrymose from the remnants of his intoxication the night before. Directly he crossed the threshold his eyes were at once directed towards the six five-franc pieces that Fouan had imprudently replaced on the table.

"Ah! it's Hyacinthe!" cried Rose, pleased at seeing him.

"Yes, it's me. Good luck to you all."

And he came forward, never taking his eyes off the white coins, which shone like moons in the candle-light. The father, who had turned his head, followed the direction of his gaze, saw the money, and gave a start of anxiety. Briskly he put a plate on top to cover it. Too late!

"Bloody fool!" he thought, cursing his carelessness, "La Grande is right."

Then, aloud, brutally:

"You do well to come and pay us, for as sure as this candle's alight, I was going to send a broker in to-morrow."

"Yes, Slutty told me so," whined Jesus Christ, with deep humility, "and I've come round because—because you don't want to see me die—do you? Pay, good God! With what am I to pay you, when I haven't even enough bread? We've sold everything, oh, I'm not kidding, come and see yourself, if you think I'm kidding. We've no more sheets to our beds, no more furniture, nothing. . . . And then, I'm ill."

An incredulous titter interrupted him. He went on without noticing it.

"Perhaps I don't look so, but for all that I've something wrong with me inside. I cough, I feel that I am going. . . . Even some soup, if I had that. When one hasn't even soup one dies, isn't that the plain truth? . . . You know I would pay you if I had the money. Tell me where to get it and I'll give you some, and let me begin by having a bit to put in the pot. It's a fortnight since I've known the sight of meat."

Rose began to be moved, but Fouan only grew angrier.

"If you've drunk everything, humbug and good-for-nothing that you are, so much the worse for you. Such fine fields, and been in the family, too, for years and years, you've mortgaged 'em! Yes, for months you and your trollop of a daughter have been on the spree, and now it's over you can go and die."

Jesus Christ hesitated no longer, he burst into tears.

"That's not like a father to speak so. It's unnatural to disown your child. I—I've a good heart, that's what'll be my ruin. . . . If you had no money! But since you've got some, how can you refuse an alms to a son? I will go and beg of other people, that will look well—yes, that will look well."

And at each phrase he cast an oblique glance through his tears at the plate, and each time the old people trembled. Then, pretending to be choking, he uttered nothing but deafening howls, like a man having his throat cut.

Rose, who was thrown out of herself, and won over by his tears, clasped her hands to implore Fouan:

"Come now, my man. . . ."

But the latter, struggling with himself, holding out still, interrupted her.

"No, no, he's mocking us. Hold your tongue, brute! Is there any sense in howling like that? The neighbours will come in, you're making us all ill."

That only made the drunkard redouble his clamour; he bellowed out:

"I've not told you all. . . . I've an execution down upon me to-morrow. Yes, for a bill I gave Lambourdieu. I'm a beast; I bring disgrace upon you; I must make an end of it. Ah, beast that I am, all I deserve is a gulp of Aigre water to quench my thirst for ever. . . . If only I had thirty francs."

Fouan, wearied out and vanquished by this scene, trembled at the figure of thirty francs. He removed the plate. What was the good? The rascal saw them, and counted them through the crockery.

"You want the whole; in God's name, is it reasonable? Come now, you're killing us, take half of it, and be off! Don't let us see you again!"

Jesus Christ, suddenly himself again, appeared to be deliberating; then he declared:

"Fifteen francs; no, it's too little, it won't settle the business. . . . Make it twenty and I'll leave you."

Afterwards, when he had received the four five-franc pieces, he made them all laugh with an account of a trick he had played on Bécu. He had dropped some sham night-lines in the preserved portion of the Aigre in such a manner that when the keeper tried to pull them up he had fallen into the water. Finally, he took his departure, after having accepted a glass of Delhomme's nasty wine. He abused him for a dirty swab, that he should dare to offer such poison to a father.

" He's good-hearted all the same," said Rose, when the door had shut upon him.

La Grande had got up—was doing up her knitting ready to depart. She looked at her sister-in-law, then at her brother, fixedly; and she went out in her turn, after crying to them with all the anger which she had repressed so long:

" Bloody fools! Not a sou! Never ask me for a sou; never, never! "

Outside she met Buteau, who was returning from Macqueron's, where he had been astounded to see Jesus Christ enter, very merry, with coins clinking in his pockets. He had a vague suspicion of what had happened.

" Ay, yes; that big blackguard has carried off your money. A lot he'll think of you when he gargles it down."

Buteau, beside himself, struck his two fists upon the Fouan's door. If they had not opened it he would have broken it down. The two old people were going to bed already; the mother had taken off her cap and her gown and wore her petticoat; her grey hairs straggled over her forehead. When they had made up their minds to open the door, he rushed between them, crying in a choking voice:

" My money! my money! "

They were afraid, drew back in astonishment, not yet understanding.

" Do you suppose that I break my back to support my scoundrel of a brother? He's not to pay a bloody farthing, and I'm to keep him going! No, no, no! "

Fouan tried to deny it, but the other cut him short brutally:

" No, what? You're going to start lying now, then? I tell you, he's got my money. I felt he had it, I heard it chink in his pocket, in that pauper's pocket! My money that I've sweated for, my money that he's going to drink! If it isn't true, show it me, then. Yes, if you've got it still, show me the coins. I know them; I shall be able to tell. Show me the coins."

And he insisted obstinately, twenty times at least he repeated the phrase, which seemed to whet his anger. He ended by striking the table with his fist, demanding the coins then and there, vowing that he would not take them, he simply wished to see them. Then, as the old people stammered out something tremulously, his fury burst out.

"He's got them, it's plain! Strike me blind! if I bring you another sou. For you I'd do anything, but to keep that sot—oh, I'd sooner lose my arms!"

The father, however, at last grew wrathful in his turn.

"That's enough now! What's my business got to do with you? It's mine, your money, and I can do what I please with it."

"What do you say?" replied Buteau, coming towards him with clenched fists, white with rage. "You want to strip me of everything. Look here! I think it's a blackguard's trick—yes, a blackguard's trick, to squeeze money out of your children, when you've enough of your own to live on. Oh, it's all very fine to say no. The nest-egg is there—I know it."

The old man looked round weakly; his voice was broken, his arms feeble; he could not find his old authority and rout him.

"No, no, there's not a farthing. Get out and be damned."

"If I was to look, if I was to look," repeated Buteau, who was already opening drawers and tapping against the walls.

Then Rose, who was terrified, and dreaded a fight between the father and son, caught hold of the latter's shoulder; she cried tremulously:

"Wretched lad—would you kill us, then?"

Quickly he turned and fronted her, seized hold of her wrists, and shouted into her face, without seeing her poor gray head, so worn out and weary.

"You!—it is your fault. It was you who gave the money to Hyacinthe. You've never liked me, you are a worthless old woman."

And he pushed her off so roughly that she was thrown down,

and collapsed in a sitting posture against the wall. She gave a low moan. He watched her for a moment, flung there like a rag. Then he went out, looking like a madman; he banged the door, and swore:

"Damnation! Damnation!"

On the following day, Rose could not leave her bed. Doctor Finet was called in, and he returned three times without giving her any relief. After the third visit, having found her in her death-throes, he took Fouan aside and asked him as a favour to let him write out the certificate of death at once and leave it. It would save another visit; he made use of this expedient in distant hamlets.

However, she lingered for another thirty-six hours. In answer to enquiries he said that it was old age and toil; it was time to go when the body was worn out. But in Rognes, where the story was known, it was said that she had had a stroke. There were a great many people at the funeral; Buteau and the rest of the family behaved admirably. And when they had filled up the hole again in the cemetery, old Fouan returned alone to the house in which they had lived and suffered together for fifty years. He ate a piece of bread and cheese standing. Then he roamed through the empty building and the garden, finding no way to kill his sorrow. He had nothing left to do; he went out and walked towards the plain to the fields which were once his to see if the wheat was coming on.

CHAPTER III

For a whole year, Fouan lived in this manner, silent in the deserted house. He was always to be seen on his legs, coming or going, his hands trembling, and he had no occupation. He remained for hours contemplating the rusty guttering on the shed; he returned and took up his position by the door of the empty barn, as if he were riveted there by some profound reverie. The garden employed him a little; but he was growing weaker, was bent down more towards the earth, as though he obeyed a summons from it; and twice they had come to help him, when he had fallen face downwards, amongst his lettuces.

Since the gift of the twenty francs to Jesus Christ, Delhomme was the only one who paid the interest, for Buteau was firm in his resolution not to fork out a half-penny, declaring that he would sooner be brought into court than see his money dribbled into the pockets of his blackguard of a brother. The latter, indeed, still, from time to time, managed to extract a dole from his father, when he had worn him out with scenes and tears.

It was then that Delhomme, seeing the old man left alone, exploited and ill from solitude, had the idea of taking him in. Why should he not sell the house and live with his daughter? He would want for nothing, and they would no longer have to pay him the two hundred francs of interest. On the following day, Buteau, having heard of the proposal, ran round and made a similar one; was lavish in his professions of filial duty. It was one thing to give money to fling away! But once it was a question of his father merely, the latter could come to him, could eat and sleep at his ease. Secretly he believed that his sister was angling for the old man, out of calculation, with an idea of getting hold of the suspected nest-egg. Yet he himself began to doubt the existence of this hoard, for which he had

searched in vain. And he was divided in his mind, he offered his house, out of vanity, believing that his father would refuse, and at the same time he was uneasy at the idea of his accepting the hospitality of Delhomme. However, Fouan showed an extreme repugnance, that was almost terror, for the first as for the second of the two proposals. No, no! dry bread in one's own house was better than roast meat in another's: it was less bitter. He had lived there, he would die there.

The matter rested there until the middle of July, till the feast of St. Henri, who was the patron saint of Rognes. A travelling dancing-booth was set up generally under canvas in the fields by the Aigre; and on the road in front of the *Mairie* there were three stalls, a rifle range, a cheap-jack who sold everything, even ribbons, and a game of Turk's head, where the prizes were sticks of barley-sugar. That day, M. Baillehache, who had lunched at La Borderie, having come down to have a talk with Delhomme, the latter asked him to accompany him to Daddy Fouan's, to try and make him hear reason. Since the death of Rose, the lawyer as well had advised him to take refuge with his daughter-in-law, and sell the useless house, with was now too large for him. It was well worth three thousand francs, he even offered to keep the money from it, and pay him the interest, in small sums, according as his small needs required it.

They found the old man in his wonted state of bewilderment, lurching about aimlessly, in stupid contemplation of a pile of wood that he wanted to saw without having the strength for it. This morning his poor hands trembled more than usual, for the night before he had undergone a terrific onslaught from Jesus Christ, who, in order to get twenty francs out of him for the morrow's festivities, had made a fearful scene. He had bellowed loud enough to drive one mad, had flung himself on the ground and threatened to stab himself to the heart wtih a knife that he had brought with him expressly, up his sleeve. And he had given the twenty francs, he confessed it to the lawyer at once, with an anguished expression.

"Tell me, would you have acted differently? Ah me! what can I do, what can I do?"

Then M. Baillehache took advantage of the incident.

"This is impossible, you will pay for it with your life. At your age it is imprudent to live alone; and if you've no mind to be eaten up, you must listen to your daughter, sell, and go to her."

"Ah, that's your advice too," murmured Fouan.

He cast a side-long look at Delhomme, who affected to be unconcerned. But when he remarked this distrustful gaze he spoke.

"You know, father, I don't say anything, because I daresay you think it's my interest to have you. Lord! No, it will be a great inconvenience. Only, don't you see, it vexes me to find you getting on so badly when you might live so comfortable."

"Well, well," replied the old man, "I must think it over some more. The day I make up my mind I shall be able to tell you."

Neither his son-in-law nor the lawyer could extract any more from him. He complained that they worried him; his authority, which had waned little by little, took refuge in this obstinacy of the old man, which resisted even his own interest. Besides his vague terror at the notion of no longer having a house, when he had suffered so much already from having no longer land, he said no, because they all wished him to say yes. No doubt the buggers had something to gain by it! He would say yes when it should please him.

The night before, Jesus Christ, in his delight, had been weak enough to show Slutty the four five-franc pieces; so that he was obliged to go to sleep holding them in his shut fist. For the last time, the young baggage had filched one of them from under the pillow, and had then taken advantage of his having come home drunk to pretend that he must have lost it. When he awoke he had a fright, the coins had slipped from his hand during his sleep; but he found them all warm under his but-

tocks, and that shook him with fine mirth. He smacked his lips already at the thought of blowing them at Lengaigne's. It was a gala day, none but a hog would come home that night with money in his pocket. In vain, all the morning, Slutty coaxed him to give her one, just a little one she said. He pushed her off, he was not even grateful for the omelette she made him out of stolen eggs. No, it was all very fine to say how much she loved her father. Money was made for men. Then she dressed herself in a passion, put on her blue poplin dress, which was a present in the days when they were having their fling, declared that she, too, was going to amuse herself. She was not twenty yards from the door when she turned round and cried out,—

"Father, father! look!"

In her outstretched hand she exhibited, at the end of her small finger-tips, a fine five-franc piece, which shone like the sun.

He thought he had been robbed, and fumbled in his pockets, growing pale. But the twenty francs were still there. The young baggage must have done some business with her geese, and the trick seemed to him so clever that he gave a paternal guffaw and let her run off. Jesus Christ was strict upon one point only, morality; so that half-an-hour later he was seized with great wrath. He was going off in his turn; had shut the door, when a peasant, out for the day, passing along the road below, hailed him:

"Jesus Christ! Hullo! Jesus Christ!"

"What's up?"

"Your daughter's on her back."

"Well, what then?"

"Well, there's a man——"

"Where are they?"

"Down there in the ditch at the end of Guillaume's field."

He shook his two fists in the air violently.

"Good! Thanks! I'll get my whip. God blast the bitch for disgracing me."

He went in again to take down the great waggoner's whip

which hung behind the door on the left, and which he only used on these occasions, and he set off with the whip under his arm, stooping down and keeping close to the bushes as if he were after game, in order to fall upon the lovers before they saw him. But when he emerged at a bend in the road, Nénesse, who was keeping watch from the top of a heap of stones, saw him. It was Delphin who was with Slutty. They took her in turns.

"Look out!" cried Nénesse, "here's Jesus Christ!"

He had seen the whip, he bolted off like a hare across country.

Her father—what a piece of bad luck! She had the presence of mind, however, to give the youngster the five-franc piece.

"Hide it in your shirt. You can give it back to me. Quick, get off my legs, for goodness' sake!"

Jesus Christ arrived like a hurricane, making the earth tremble with his hot haste, and he brandished his huge whip until he made it crack like a pistol shot.

"Ah, you bitch! Ah, you whore, I'll give you beans!"

In his passion, when he recognized the son of the gamekeeper, he missed him; and the latter escaped on all fours through the brambles. The girl was caught, her petticoats were up, and she could not deny it. With one cut, which lashed her thighs, he brought her to her feet and dragged her out of the ditch. And the chase began.

"Take that, child of a whore! See if that will cork it for you."

Slutty, without a word, accustomed to these chases, ran off with leaps like a young goat. Her father's ordinary manœuvre was to drive her back thus to the house, where he shut her up. So that she endeavoured to escape towards the plain, hoping to tire him out. This time she was likely to succeed, thanks to a chance encounter. For the last minute, M. Charles and Élodie had been present; they had come to a halt, stood stock-still in the middle of the road. They had seen everything; the

child's eyes were wide open with innocent bewilderment; he was scarlet with shame, boiling with respectable exasperation. And the worst of it was that the shameless Slutty recognized him and wanted to put herself under his protection.

He pushed her away, but the whip approached; and to avoid it she bobbed round her uncle and her cousin, whilst her father, with oaths and trooper's talk, reproached her conduct, dancing after her, and cracking his whip with all the vigour of his arm. M. Charles, imprisoned in this abominable circle, grew breathless and confused; he was obliged to content himself with burying Élodie's face in his waistcoat. And he lost his head to such an extent that his own language became extremely gross.

"Now then, you dirty cow, will you leave us alone! To think my bloody relations should turn the country-side into a bawdy-house."

Slutty was dislodged, she felt that she was lost. A cut from the whip just under her armpits set her spinning like a top. A second tumbled her over, and tore out a lock of her hair. Thenceforward her face was set in the right direction, and her one thought was to get back to her burrow as quickly as she could. She leapt over hedges, jumped the ditches, cut across the vines, without the least fear of impaling herself on one of the poles. But her little legs abandoned the contest; the strokes of the whip rained upon the round shoulders, on the still quivering loins, on the small girl's precocious flesh. And she began to jest at it, ended by finding it nice to get such a tremendous tickling. It was with an outburst of nervous laughter that she entered with a bound, and crouched in a corner out of reach of the big whip.

"Give me your five francs," said the father. "It's to punish you."

She swore that she had lost them running; but he laughed incredulously, and searched her. Finding nothing, he lost his temper afresh.

"So you've given them to your sweetheart? Blast you for a fool! You do their bloody pleasure, and pay them too."

He went off beside himself, shutting her in. He cried out that she should stay there alone till the next day, for he didn't mean to come in.

Slutty, when his back was turned, examined her body, which was only striped with two or three blue marks. She did up her hair, and dressed again. Then she calmly picked the lock, a task at which she had acquired extreme dexterity. Then she decamped without even troubling to shut the door; thieves would be finely sold if they came thieving there! She knew where to rejoin Nénesse and Delphin, in a little wood on the bank of the Aigre. Indeed they were waiting there for her; and it was her cousin Nénesse's turn. He had three francs, the other six sous. When Delphin had given her back her coin, she resolved, like a good-natured girl, that they should spend the whole of it together. They went back in the direction of the festivities; she made them shoot for macaroons, after she had bought for herself a big bow of red satin that she stuck in her hair.

Jesus Christ, however, had arrived at Lengaigne's, when he met Bécu, who was wearing his badge, polished up, over a new blouse. He abused him roundly.

"Look here! Is this how you go your rounds? Do you know where I've caught your Delphin?"

"Where?"

"Up my girl. I shall write to the magistrate and get him to sack you. You ——

Bécu grew wroth at once.

"Your girl! I've never seen her, except on her back! Strike me blind, if I don't have her packed off to jail!"

"Just try it, you swob!"

The two men glared into each others' faces furiously. Suddenly there was a collapse, their anger melted away.

"Let's understand each other; come in and have a glass," said Jesus Christ.

"Haven't a halfpenny," said Bécu.

Merrily the other pulled out the first five-franc piece; he tossed it up once, then stuck it in his eye.

"Well, shall we go in and blow it, my joker? Come in, my old sausage! It's my turn, you've stood often enough."

They went into Lengaigne's, laughing easily, giving each other big, friendly shoves. That year Lengaigne had had an idea. As the owner of the travelling dancing-saloon refused to set up his booth, disgusted at not having paid his expenses the year before, the inn-keeper had been enterprising enough to start one in his barn which joined the shop, and whose big door for waggons opened on to the road. He had even abolished the partition so that the two rooms now communicated with each other. And this idea had gained him the patronage of the entire village; his rival, Macqueron, on the opposite side, was furious to find himself without a customer.

"Two pints, sharp, one for each of us!" shouted Jesus Christ.

When Flore served them, breathless and radiant at such a sight of company, he saw that he had interrupted a letter which Lengaigne was reading aloud, standing in the midst of a group of peasants. In answer to his question, the latter answered with an important air that it was a letter from his son Victor, written from his regiment.

"Ah, ah! the lucky dog," said Bécu with interest. "And what does he say? You must begin again."

And Lengaigne began his reading again:

"My dear parents, this is to tell you that we are here, at Lille, in Flandre, for the last month, all but seven days. The country is not bad, only wine is dear. We have to pay as much as sixteen sous the litre."

And the letter, in four closely-written pages, contained very little else. The same fact cropped up perpetually, in long unwieldy sentences. All, moreover, exclaimed each time the price of wine was mentioned: "Fine quarters there!" Through the

last lines an attempt at humbug was visible; twelve francs were asked for, to replace shoes that had been lost.

"Ah, the dog!" repeated the keeper. "Gad! what a man it is!"

After the two pints, Jesus Christ asked for two more, bottled wine at twenty sous. He paid on the nail to astonish them, knocking his money on the table, revolutionizing the inn. And when his first five-franc piece was drunk, he pulled out a second, stuck it once more in his eye, and shouted that when that was gone there was more left. In this fashion the afternoon glided away, with a buzz of tipplers passing in and out in the midst of an increasing drunkenness. All of them, so sombre and meditative in the working week, grew noisy now, and banged their fists and spat furiously. A tall, lean man took it into his head to get shaved, and Lengaigne gave him a seat promptly amongst the others, and scratched away at his chin so lustily that you could hear the razor on the skin as though a pig were being scalded. A second took his place; it was quite a lark. And the tongues began to wag; people fell upon Macqueron, who was afraid to come out of doors. It was his own fault—this rubbishy deputy-mayor's fault—that the dancing-saloon had not come. People ought to make concessions. But to be sure he preferred voting roads so as to get paid three times the value of the land that he "gave." This allusion provoked a storm of laughter. Big Flore, whose turn it was to-day to triumph, ran to the door, and burst out in insulting merriment whenever she saw Cœlina's bilious face at the opposite window.

"Cigars, Madame Lengaigne," ordered Jesus Christ in his stentorian voice. "Good'uns, penny ones."

When night fell, and the paraffin lamps were lit, La Bécu arrived; she had come to find her man. But a tremendous game of cards was going on.

"I say, are you coming? It's past eight o'clock. You must feed, you know."

He looked at her glassily, with a drunkard's majestic air.

"Go to hell!"

Then Jesus Christ burst out.

"Madame Bécu, I invite you—ay? We'll go and punish some victuals, the three of us. D'ye hear, missus? Your very best, ham, rabbit, dessert. Don't be afraid. Come and look here a bit. Attention!"

He pretended to make a long search. Then suddenly he brought out his third five-franc piece, and held it up to view.

"Cu-coo! Here it is!"

The company was bent double with laughter. One big man nearly choked himself. That beggar, Jesus Christ, what a wag he was, and no mistake! Some of them felt him all over, with burlesque gestures, from top to toe, as though he were stuffed with crown-pieces enough to quench an illimitable thirst.

"Look here, La Bécu," he repeated, ten times over, while he went on eating, "if Bécu likes, we'll go to bed together. Does that suit you?"

She was very slatternly, not knowing, she said, that she would stay for the *fête*. And she laughed, poor wretch, looking as black and lean as some mildewed old eel, whilst the gay dog, without waiting longer, thrust his hands up her naked thighs under cover of the table. The husband, dead-drunk, prattled and laughed on. He shouted out that the bitch wouldn't mind the two of them.

Ten o'clock struck; the ball began. Through the door of communication they could see four lamps flickering, fastened to the beams by wires. Clou, the blacksmith, was there with his trombone, as well as a ropemaker's nephew from Bazoches-le-Doyen, who played the fiddle. People entered without payment; they paid a penny for each dance. The worn mud floor of the barn had been watered to lay the dust. When the music ceased, the reports from the shooting gallery, crisp and regular, could be heard outside; and the road, ordinarily so dark, was illuminated by the reflection from the other two booths, the toy-

stalls gleaming with gew-gaws, the game of Turk's-head, which was decked with mirrors and hung with red, like an oratory.

"Why, there's the girlie!" cried Jesus Christ, with moist eyes.

It was, indeed, Slutty who had entered the ball-room, followed by Nénesse and Delphin, and the father showed no surprise at seeing her there, though he had left her locked up. In additon to the red bow which bedecked her hair, she wore round her neck a thick necklace of sham coral whose beads of sealing-wax made a scarlet blot upon her brown skin. All three were tired of roaming round the booths, and they felt stupid and heavy with indigestion from over-indulgence in sweets. Delphin was in a blouse, and his head was bare—his round, rough head, like a little savage's. He cared for nothing but the open air. Nénesse, who was exercised already by a desire to shine as a town dandy, was clothed in a suit of ditto's, bought at Lambordieu's, one of those outfits that are run up by the gross in inferior Paris workshops; and he wore a round felt hat to show his dislike of his native village, which he despised.

"Girlie!" shouted Jesus Christ, "Girlie! come and taste this. . . . Well, it's famous stuff, ain't it?"

He made her drink out of his glass, whilst Bécu asked Delphin sternly:—

"What have you done with your cap?"

"I've lost it."

"Lost it! Just come here, and I'll box your ears."

But Bécu interfered with a laugh; he was tickled by the precocious gallantry of his son.

"Let him alone! He's growing up fast. So, you young devils, you rub bellies together, do you? Do you? Oh, the dog, the dog!"

"Go and play," concluded Jesus Christ, paternally. "And behave yourselves!"

"They're as drunk as hogs," said Nénesse with a disgusted air, as they joined the dancers.

Slutty began to laugh.

"I believe you; I counted on it. That's why they're so nice."

The ball was getting lively; they could only hear Clou's trombone, which thundered down and stifled the shrill notes of the little fiddle. The ground had been watered too freely, and the heavy shoes churned it into mud; and soon from all the floating skirts, the shirts and bodices, that were moistened beneath the armpits by big stains of sweat, a penetrating, hirsute odour exhaled, accentuating the acrid smell from the lamps. But in an interval between two quadrilles an exciting incident happened —the arrival of the Macquerons' daughter, Berthe, in a toilette of silk, exactly like what the teacher's daughters at Cloyes wore on St. Lubin's day. What did this mean? Had her parents given her permission to come, or had she slipped off when their backs were turned? They noticed she danced exclusively with the son of a certian wheelwright, whom her father had forbidden her to know owing to some family feud. They joked about it: apparently it no longer amused her to ruin her health by herself!

Jesus Christ, extremely drunk as he was, had noticed during the last minute Lequeu's ugly face peering through the door of communication, as he watched Berthe revolving in the arms of her young man.

"I say, Monsieur Lequeu, why don't you dance with your sweetheart?"

"Who is my sweetheart?" asked the schoolmaster, his face growing livid with anger.

"Why, she yonder with the pretty eyes—and the tell-tale marks under 'em!"

Lequeu, furious at being detected, turned his back and remained there motionless; he wrapped himself in one of his superior silences, which he cultivated out of caution and contempt. Lengaigne having advanced, Jesus Christ button-holed him. So that ink-pot had thrown up the sponge. Perhaps he had an eye

on a rich girl! It was not as if Got-None was such a swell; after all, she had no hairs except on her head; and, thoroughly initiated, he confirmed the thing as though he had seen it himself. It was a story known from Cloyes to Châteaudun; the lads all laughed over it. 'Pon his word of honour, not a single hair! The place was as bald as a Reverend's chin. Then all of them, in astonishment at this phenomenon, stood up to look at Berthe; they followed her with a perceptible grimace of repulsion whenever the dance brought her past them. She looked very white in the midst of her wreathing skirts.

"You old rascal," went on Jesus Christ, who had begun to be familiar with Lengaigne; "she's not like your girl: she's got some!"

He answered, with an air of vanity:

"Oh, to be sure she has."

Suzanne was now in Paris, extremely well off, people said. He was discrete about it, spoke of a good situation. But rustics were perpetually coming in; and a farmer having asked for Victor's news, he brought out the letter once more.

"My dear parents,—This is to tell you that we are here at Lille, in Flanders. . . ."

Everyone listened. People who had already heard it five or six times drew near. "Sixteen sous the litre; was it really? Yes, sixteen sous!"

"What a blasted country!" repeated Bécu.

Jean put in an appearance at this moment. He went at once to cast a glance at the dancing, as though he were looking for somebody. Then he returned, looking anxious and disappointed. For the last two months he had not ventured to pay Buteau such frequent visits as of old, for he found him cold—almost hostile. No doubt, he had not succeeded in hiding his feeling for Françoise, his growing kindness for her, which was become a fever nowadays, and the comrade must have noticed it. No doubt it had displeased him—upset his calculations.

" Good evening," said Jean, coming up to a table where Fouan and Delhomme were drinking a bottle of beer.

" Will you do the same as us, Corporal? " Delhomme suggested politely.

Jean accepted, and when he had drunk their health:

" It's odd that Buteau hasn't come."

" Why, there he is! " said Fouan.

In effect, Buteau had come in, but alone. Slowly he made a tour of the inn, shaking hands with people; then, when he reached the table where were his father and his brother-in-law, he stood still; he declined a seat, would not drink anything.

" Aren't Lise and Françoise going to dance then? " Jean asked at last, his voice trembling.

Buteau looked at him fixedly with his little, hard eyes.

" Françoise has gone to bed; that's the best place for young people."

But a disturbance close by called their attention and cut them short.

Jesus Christ had caught hold of Flore. He had ordered a pint of rum to make a burnt punch and she declined to bring it.

" No, nothing more; you're drunk enough."

" Eh? What's that you're singing? Do you think I shan't pay you, you bitch? I'll buy up the show if you like. Well, I've only got to blow my nose. Watch! "

He had his fourth five-franc piece hidden in his hand. He pinched his nose with two fingers, blew hard, and made as though he had brought the coin from it. Then he held it up like a monstrance:

" That's how I blow my nose when I've a cold."

The walls resounded with applause, and Flore was conquered. She brought the pint of rum and some sugar. Then a bowl was required. Then " that beggar, Jesus Christ," held the attention of the whole room, while he stirred the punch, his elbows on the table, his red face lit up by the flames, which gave the last touch

to the overheated atmosphere, the thick fog from lamps and pipes. But Buteau, who was aggravated at the sight of the money, burst out suddenly:

"Hog that you are! aren't you ashamed of drinking money you've robbed from our father, like that?"

The other met him with banter.

"Ah, you've found a tongue, young 'un! . . . Is it an empty stomach makes you talk such balderdash?"

"I say you're a cur, and you'll end on the gallows. . . . And what's more, it was you made the mother die of grief."

The drunkard gave a tap with his spoon and raised a fiery tempest in the punch-bowl, while he suppressed his laughter.

"Good, good! Say some more. To be sure it was me, if it wasn't you."

"And I tell you, too, that spendthrifts of your sort don't deserve the crops should grow. . . . When I think of our land —yes, all that land that our fathers toiled so hard to leave us, how you've pawned it, chucked it away to others! You dirty swob, what have you done with the land?"

Jesus Christ grew suddenly animated. The flame from his punch had gone out; he squared himself, sat back in his chair, noticing that all the other drinkers were listening in silence as though they were judges.

"The land!" he bellowed, "a bloody lot it cares for you, the land! You're its slave; it robs you of your pleasure, your strength, your life, idiot! and it doesn't even make you rich. As for me, who despise it, and fold my arms and am content to give it a kick—well, look at me, I live on my income; I can wet my whistle. There, my bloody joker!"

The peasants were still laughing, when Buteau, surprised by the abruptness of this attack, was reduced to stammering out:

"Good for nothing! Bungler, who can't work, and won't work, and boast of it!"

"The Earth, it's all humbug," continued Jesus Christ, warm-

ing to his work. "It's true! You'll be rusty enough if you stick to the humbug. Does it exist, the Earth? It's yours, it's mine, it's nobody's. Wasn't it the old lot's? And didn't they have to cut it up and give it to us? And won't you cut it up for your young 'uns? Then, look here! It comes and goes, gets more and less, gets less especially, for aren't you a big pot with your six acres, and the father had nineteen. For my part, I was sick of it, it was too little, I've put it up the spout. Besides, I like safe investments, and the land you know, young 'un, is going to smash. I wouldn't put a bloody cent in it, it's a dirty business, a blasted failure that'll clean you all out. It's going bankrupt, and you're a lot of flats."

A dead silence had established itself by degrees in the inn. No one laughed any more, the peasants' uneasy faces were all turned towards this big ruffian, whose odd medley of opinions were let loose when he was drunk—the ideas of an old African campaigner, a loafer in towns, a tavern politician. Dominating it all, was the man of '48, the humanitarian Communist, who was still on his knees before '89.

"Liberty, equality, fraternity! We must go back to the Revolution. We were robbed in the partition, the *bourgeois* have taken everything, and by God! we'll make them hand it back. Is there any justice, please, that that bloody joker at La Borderie should have all the land and me nothing? I want my rights, I want my share, everybody shall have their share."

Bécu, who was too drunk to stand up for authority, approved without understanding. But he had a gleam of good sense, and made some reservations.

"That's so, that's so. Only, the king's the king. What's mine ain't yours."

A murmur of approval uprose, and Buteau had his revenge.

"Don't listen to him, he deserves to be shot."

The laughter broke out again, and Jesus Christ lost all restraint; he banged his fists.

"Listen to me, then, some day. Yes, you damned coward, I

shall have something to say to you. You swagger to-day because you are in with the mayor and the sub-mayor, your twopenny halfpenny deputy. Ah! you lick his boots, you're fool enough to think he's the stronger, and he'll help you sell your wheat. Well, I, for my part, who've nothing to sell, I put my foot in your behind, you and the mayor, and his sub, and the deputy, and police, and all! To-morrow, it will be our turn to be the stronger, and it won't be only me, but all the poor buggers who are tired of starving to death, and there'll be you, too. Yes, the rest of you when you're sick of keeping the *bourgeois* without having so much as bread to eat yourselves! Down with the proprietors! We'll cut their throats, the land will be for who likes to take it. D'ye hear that, young 'un, your land, I'll take it, I'll shit upon it."

"Come and try, and I'll shoot you down like a dog," cried Buteau, so transported with anger that he went out and slammed the door. Lequeu, who had listened with a reserved air, had already taken himself off, like an official who could not compromise his position any longer. Fouan and Delhomme, absorbed in their glasses, did not breathe a word; they felt disgraced, and knew that if they interfered the drunkard would only become more vociferous. At the neighbouring tables the peasants had ended by getting angry. What? their property was no longer theirs, somebody would come and take it from them? And they murmured, they were on the point of falling on this "free-lander" and cuffing him out of doors, when Jean arose. He had not taken his eyes off him nor lost one of his words; his face was grave, as though he were sifting out what was fair from these statements which repelled him so.

"Jesus Christ," he declared quietly, "you had better hold your tongue. It's best not to say that sort of thing, and if you happen to be in the right you're not very cute, for you are putting yourself in the wrong."

The coolness of the young man, the prudence of his remark suddenly calmed Jesus Christ. He sank back on his chair, declar-

ing that it was "bloody much the same to him," after all. And he resumed his jokes; he kissed La Bécu, whose husband had fallen into a sodden sleep on the table; he finished his punch, drinking it out of the bowl. The laughter began again, in the gathering cloud of smoke. At the end of the barn, the dancing went on continuously. Clou blared the accompaniments on his trombone, whose thunder stifled the shrill notes of the little fiddle. Sweat poured off people's bodies and added its acrid odour to the fetid smell of the lamps. Slutty's red bow was to be seen everywhere, as she waltzed round with Nénesse and Delphin in turn. Berthe also was still there, faithful to her sweetheart, dancing with him alone. In a corner, the young men, whom she had ignored, were sneering. Lord! if the flat didn't mind her peculiarity, she was wise to stick to him, for there were others who, in spite of her money, would have waited until it grew, before they thought of marrying her.

"Let's go to bed," said Fouan to Jean and Delhomme.

Outside, when Jean had left them, the old man walked along in silence. He seemed to be ruminating upon the things he had just heard; and suddenly, as though they had decided him, he turned to his son-in-law.

"I will sell the old home, and come and live with you. It's settled. Good-night!"

Slowly, he went back alone. His heart was heavy, his feet dragged over the dark road, in his extreme sadness he staggered like a drunken man. His land had gone from him already, and soon he would no longer have a house. It seemed to him as though they were cutting through the old beams and taking off the tiles from above his head. Henceforward he had not a stone to shelter him; he must wander about the country, like a beggar, night and day, perpetually; and in rainy weather, the cold rain, the ceaseless rain would beat upon him.

CHAPTER IV

The fierce August sun was above the horizon by five in the morning, and La Beauce spread out its panorama of ripe corn beneath a flaming sky. Since the last showers of the summer, the green, ever-growing expanse had gradually yellowed over. It was a sea of flaming gold now, which seemed to reflect back the ardent quality of the air, a sea whose crest of fire was ruffled at the least breath of wind. Nothing but wheat; not a house, not a tree was visible; an infinite expanse of wheat! Sometimes a dead calm sent the ears to sleep beneath the heat; a smell of fruitfulness exhaled from the earth like steam. The travail drew to a close; the swelling seed seemed to burst from the universal womb in rich and heavy grain. And along this plain, besides this huge harvest, an anxious feeling was generated, such as man with his insect body, so small in the midst of such immensity, can never quite escape from. At La Borderie, Hourdequin, having finished with the rye a week ago, had now fallen upon the wheat. The previous year his reaping machine had got out of order; and, in despair at his men's ill-will, and beginning even to doubt himself of the efficiency of his machinery, he had been obliged to reinforce himself with a gang of harvesters since Ascension Day. As was customary, he had hired them in Le Perche, at Mondoubleau; the leading-hand, a big, lean man, five other reapers, and six helpers, four women and two young girls. They had come in a cart as far as Cloyes, where the farm waggon had been sent to pick them up. The whole company of them slept in the sheep-fold, which was empty at this season; they lay pell-mell about the straw, girls, women, men, in semi-nudity on account of the heat.

This was the season when Jacqueline was busiest. Work infringed upon the hours of bed-time and of rising; people were

about at three in the morning, they sought their straw again at ten o'clock at night. And she must be always up the first, to prepare the four o'clock soup, just as she was the last to go to bed when the big nine o'clock meal was over, with its bacon, beef and cabbages. Between these two meals there were three others: a lunch of bread and cheese, a second soup at noon, a collation of bread and milk; in all five abundant meals, washed down with wine and cider, for the harvesters, who work hard, are exacting. But she laughed as though it stimulated her; beneath her feline softness she had muscles like steel, and her insensibility to fatigue was the more remarkable in that just now her kindness was killing Tron, that great, rough cow-herd, for whose flesh, which was tender, giant though he was, she had a ravenous hunger. She had got him to follow her like a dog; she took him into the barns, into the hay-loft, even into the sheep-fold now that the shepherd, whose prying eyes she feared, slept out of doors with his sheep. At night especially she banqueted on his virility, and rose from it slim and supple, and overflowing with energy. Hourdequin observed nothing, knew nothing. He had the harvest fever, his particular fever, the great annual crisis of his passion for the soil. He shivered inwardly, his head on fire, his heart palpitating; his flesh quivered as the ripe ears fell.

The nights were so broiling this year that often Jean could not bear them in the loft where he slept, close to the stable. He went out and preferred to throw himself down in his clothes on the pavement of the court-yard. It was not only the intolerable animal heat of the horses, the effluvia from their fodder, which drove him away; it was his sleeplessness, in which the perpetual image of Françoise hovered, a fixed idea that she was there, that he had seized her and crushed her to his breast. Now that Jacqueline, otherwise employed, left him to himself, his love for this child had grown into a passion of desire. A score of times, in the misery of this state of semi-slumber, he swore to himself that he would go the next day and have her; then when he rose and had plunged his head into a pail of cold water that seemed dis-

gusting; he was too old for her. And the torture began again on the following night. When the harvesters came he recognized amongst them a woman, the wife of one of the reapers, whom he had tumbled two years previously, when she was still a young girl. One evening his torture was so great that he slipped into the sheep-fold, and caught her feet as she lay between her husband and a brother, who snored with open mouths. She yielded incontinently. And it was a gluttonous feast, which silently ensued, in the hot darkness, upon the worn earth of the floor, which, despite the rakes, had retained from the winter occupation of the sheep, an odour of ammonia so penetrating that it made the eyes water. For a space of twenty days he returned there every night.

By the second week of the month of August the work had made some progress. The reapers had begun with the northern fields, and moved down towards those which bordered the Aigre valley; and sheaf by sheaf the vast growth was laid low; each stroke of the scythe told, and left a round gap. The tiny insects, lost in the magnitude of their labour, issued from it victorious. Behind their slow advance, the line of level earth once more appeared; the rough stubble across which the bowed figures of the women helpers stumbled. It was the season when the vast, sad solitude of La Beauce was most alleviated; it grew inhabited, was animated by the constant stir of labourers, of carts and horses. As far as the eye could reach gangs were working in the same oblique line, with the same motion of the arms; some so close that the hiss of their steel was audible, others mere black spots, like ants, upon the line of sky. And on all sides breaches were made, as in a rending garment, that gives way everywhere. Strip by strip, in the midst of this ant-like activity, La Beauce put off its rich mantle, its solitary summer adornment, which left it suddenly desolate and bare. For the last day or two the heat had been overpowering, one day especially, when Jean was carting the sheaves, hard by Buteau's field, on to a part of the farm where a rick was to be built, nearly thirty feet high and containing

three thousand trusses. The stubble crackled, it was so parched; and the wheat that still stood was motionless in the burning air; one would have said that it burned itself, with a visible flame in the twinkling sunshine. And there was not an inch of shade, nothing but the men's stunted shadows on the ground. Since the morning Jean loaded and unloaded his cart beneath the fiery sky, sweating and silent, with just one glance after each journey at the field in which Françoise, behind Buteau, who was reaping, bent down to bind up the sheaves, Buteau had been obliged to take on Palmyre to help. Françoise was not enough, and he could not count upon Lise, who was eight months gone with child. This pregnancy exasperated him. He had taken such precautions! How had this bloody child come there? He stormed at his wife, and accused her of doing it on purpose; and he grumbled for hours, as if it was some beggar or stray animal which was foisted upon him to eat him out of house and home. At eight months he could not set eyes on Lise's figure without abusing her. Her bloody belly! Less brains than a goose! The ruin of her home! That morning she had come to help, but he had sent her back, enraged at her slow clumsiness. She was to return and bring them their snack at four o'clock.

"'Struth!" said Buteau, who was intent upon finishing a corner of the field, "My back's roasted, and my tongue's as dry as a chip."

He drew himself up; his feet were bare in their big shoes, he was clad only in a shirt and canvas trousers. The shirt was open and half out of the trousers, exposing the damp hairs on his chest as far down as the navel.

"I must have a drink again!"

And he went and took a bottle of cider from the coat in which he had sheltered it. When he had taken two draughts of the lukewarm stuff he thought of the little one.

"Aren't you thirsty?"

"Yes."

Françoise took the bottle and had a long drink, showing no

disgust at it; and whilst her head was thrown back, her back bent, her breast protruded, straining its thin covering, he watched her. She, too, was dripping wet in her disordered print gown. The top hook of her bodice was undone, and the white flesh was visible. Beneath the blue kerchief, in which she had covered her head and neck, her eyes looked very large in her silent face that glowed from the heat.

Without another word he set to work again, swaying on his haunches, laying low a heap with every stroke of the scythe, while the whistle of the steel lent an accompaniment to his steps. Once more bending forward, she followed him, her right hand armed with a sickle which she used to sift her armful of wheat from out the thistles. Regularly, every three paces, she laid them down in loose sheaves. When he looked up, just long enough to wipe his forehead with the back of his hand, and saw her too far in the rear, with her buttocks in the air, his tongue seemed more parched than ever; he shouted in hoarse tones: "No laziness."

Palmyre, in the field adjoining, where the straw of the shocks had been drying for the last three days, was engaged in tying up the sheaves. He did not trouble to watch her, for he paid her by the hundred, an arrangement most unusual, made under the pretext that she was no longer strong enough, was worn out and old already, and that if he gave her thirty sous, as the young women required, he would lose over it. She had even been obliged to entreat him; he had only decided to take her on when he found he could cheat her; and he did so resignedly, with the air of a Christian doing a good work. The wretched woman gathered up three or four shocks, as many as her thin arms could hold, then tied the sheath stoutly with a thong she had all ready. This task of binding, a labour so arduous that the men generally reserve it for themselves—wore her out; her breast was bruised with the constant burdens, her arms aching from gripping the big bundles and pulling on the straw ligatures. She had brought a bottle with her in the morning, and she went every hour to fill

it at a neighbouring pond, which was muddy and stinking; she drank it greedily, in spite of the diarrhœa which pulled her down in hot weather, a disorder which came from perpetually overworking herself.

But the blue of the sky had paled; it was the paleness of a vault grown white hot. The sun might have been stirred so that hot embers fell. It was after luncheon-time, the languid, oppressive hour of the siesta. Already Delhomme and his men, who were at work hard by piling up the sheaves, four below and one on top for a roof, had disappeared; they were all lying at the bottom of some dip in the land. For an instant longer old Fouan was visible. He was living with his son-in-law since he had sold his house, a fortnight ago. Then he must have stretched himself flat like the others; he was no longer to be seen. On the blank horizon, over the broiling surface of the stubble, nothing was visible but, far away, the sharp silhouette of La Grande, as she contemplated a tall rick that her people had begun in the midst of its small companions, the sheaves, that were half demolished. She was like a tree that age had hardened, with nothing more to fear from the sun, as she stood erect and without a drop of sweat on her, in fierce disapproval of her sleeping hands.

"Zut! my skin is crackling," said Buteau.

And turning towards Françoise:

"Well, shall we have a nap?"

He looked round for a little shade, but saw none. The sun was exactly overhead; it beat on everything; there was not so much as a bush to shelter them. At last he noticed that, at one end of the field, some still standing wheat projected a brown rim of shadow.

"Eh! Palmyre," he cried, "are you coming with us?"

She was fifty paces off; she answered in a voice so faint that it came to them like a sigh:

"No, no! I've not time."

She was the only one working throughout the scorching plain. Unless she brought back her thirty sous that evening Hilarion

would beat her; for he not only massacred her with his brutal appetites, but had taken to rob her in order to get drunk with brandy. But she had reached the end of her strength. Her flat body—it seemed to have neither breasts nor buttocks, but was planed like a plank with hardship—her body cracked, as if it were nigh breaking, with each fresh sheaf she gathered up and tied. With her leaden-coloured face, worn away like an old penny, sixty years old at five and thirty, she let the burning sun lick up the last dregs of her life, in the desperate effort of a beast of burden which sinks down and dies.

Buteau and Françoise lay down side by side. Silent, with shut eyes, now that they were motionless the sweat steamed off them. A profound slumber overwhelmed them promptly; they slept for an hour, and the sweat did not cease, it poured off their limbs in the air which was as still and as oppressive as the inside of an oven. When Françoise opened her eyes, she saw that Buteau had turned over on one side, and was watching her with a jaundiced eye. She shut her eyes, pretended to have fallen asleep again. Although, so far, he had said nothing to her, she was sensible that he wanted her, now that he had watched her grow up and she was actually a woman. The thought upset her; would he dare, the brute, whom, every night she heard abandon himself with her sister? His bestial lust, like that of a neighing stallion, had never irritated her to such a degree. Would he dare? And she waited for him, unconsciously desiring it, although she had made up her mind to throttle him, if he touched her. Suddenly, as she shut her eyes tightly, Buteau caught hold of her.

"You blackguard! you blackguard!" she panted, as she pushed him off.

He gave a mad laugh, murmured in a low voice:

"Fool! let yourself go. . . . I tell you, they're asleep, nobody's looking."

At that moment, the white and suffering face of Palmyre appeared above the corn; she had looked round at the noise. But

as for her, she did not count, any more than a cow who might have poked its head in. And, in effect, she went back to her sheaves indifferently. Once more they heard her bones, which cracked with each effort.

"Fool! Lise will never know."

At her sister's name, Françoise, whose resistance had grown weaker, who was almost vanquished, pulled herself together. And after that she held out stoutly, pounding with her two fists, kicking her two bare legs. Was he hers, this man? What did she want with somebody else's leavings?

"Go with my sister, hog! do her to death, if it amuses you! get her a child every night!"

Buteau began to grow wroth beneath her blows; he thought it was only that she feared the consequences, and growled out:

"You bloody fool! I swear I won't get you with a child."

With a kick, she caught him in the groin, and he had to let go of her; but he gave her such a fierce shove that she stifled a cry of pain. It was time the game ended, for when Buteau got on his feet he discovered Lise returning to them with their tea. He walked to meet her, and kept her for a moment, to give Françoise time to adjust her petticoats. The thought that she would tell her everything made him regret that he had not finished her off, crushed her under his heel. But she did not speak, she contented herself with sitting down amongst the sheaves, looking stubborn and insolent. When he began to reap, she stayed there, lazily, like a princess.

"What?" Lise asked, as she stretched herself out also, tired from her walk, "aren't you working?"

"No, I'm sick of it!" she answered angrily.

Buteau, not daring to rouse her, fell then upon his wife. What bloody business had she there, stretched out like a sow, warming her belly in the sun? It was a beauty, it was, a famous pumpkin to try and ripen! She laughed at this simile, she had retained the gaiety of her plump, good-natured days. It was true enough, perhaps, that that ripened it, brought on the kid;

and beneath the flaming sky she stuck out her huge belly, which might have been the head of some seed, sprouting out of the fertile earth. But he was in no laughing mood. He compelled her to get up, brutally, he wanted her to help him. Hindered, as she was, by the protuberance which overtopped her thighs, she had to kneel down; and she gathered up the stalks with side-way motions, panting, with her monstrous belly twisted, hanging over her left side.

"Since you're no good," she said to her sister, "go back home, anyhow. You can make the soup."

Françoise went off without a word. Though the heat was still stifling, La Beauce had resumed its aspect of activity; the little black blots, made by the gangs of men, reappeared and swarmed as far as the eye could reach. Delhomme finished his with his two men, whilst La Grande watched her rick rising, leaning on her stick, quite ready to throw it at the head of any idler. Fouan went to have a look at it, then came back and was engrossed in the task of his son-in-law; then wandered off with the languid pace of an old man full of recollections and regrets. And Francoise, her head buzzing, hardly recovered from her shock, kept along the new road, until a voice hailed her:—

"Over here! Come along!"

It was Jean, who was half hidden behind the sheaves, which since the morning he had been carting from the adjoining fields. He had just unloaded his cart; the two horses waited motionless in the sun. The big rick was not to be started till the next day, and he had simply put them in heaps, three rough walls, between which, as it might have been a chamber, was a hole in the straw, deep and discreet.

"Come along then! It's me!"

Mechanically, Françoise obeyed his summons. She did not even take the precaution to look behind her. Had she looked round, she would have seen Buteau standing on tip-toe, in amazement at seeing her leave the road. At first Jean chaffed her.

"How proud you're getting; you go by without saying good-day to your friends."

"Gracious!" she answered, "you were hidden, I didn't see you."

He went on to complain of the bad reception he met with now from Buteau. But her mind was wandering; she was silent, or answered only with monosyllables. Involuntarily she had let herself drop down on the straw at the bottom of the hole, as if she were exhausted with fatigue. She was possessed by one thing alone, it stayed in her flesh like a sharp material sting: that man's onslaught further down at the end of the field. She still felt his hot hands grip her thighs like a vice, his smell haunted her, the approach of the male, that she must needs wait for, panting, in an agony of resisted desire. She shut her eyes, she was suffocating.

Thenceforward Jean too was silent. When he saw her thus, prostrate and yielding, the blood in his veins coursed fiercely. He had not counted on this meeting; he resisted his temptation, thinking that it would be wrong to take advantage of this child. But the beating of his heart made him giddy; he had so greatly desired her. And a vision of possession invaded him, as during his nights of fever. He lay down beside her; he contented himself at first with her hand, then with her two hands, which he crushed together, not even daring to lift them to his lips. She did not withdraw them; she opened her vague eyes, with their heavy lids, and looked at him without a smile, or a trace of shame, her face drawn down nervously. And it was this silent, almost anguished glance which rendered him suddenly brutal.

"No, no," she stammered; "please don't. . . ."

But she made no resistance. She gave one cry of pain. It seemed as though earth gave way under her; and in her giddiness she lost all understanding; was it the other man who had come back? She found the same roughness, the same pungency of the male animal reeking from coarse work in the sun. Her confusion grew so great in the burning darkness which she in-

habited,—for her eyelids were obstinately shut—that a few involuntary words escaped her unconsciously. But the human seed, turned aside and wasted, fell amongst the ripe corn, upon the Earth, who has no refusals, whose womb is free to all men's sowing, fruitful eternally.

Françoise opened her eyes again without a word or movement, simply dazed. What? it was over already; she had had no more pleasure! There was nothing left of it but the pain. And the thought of that other man returned to her in the unconscious regret of her baulked desire. Jean, by her side, irritated her. Why had she yielded? She did not love him—he was old! He stayed as motionless as herself, aghast at what had happened. Finally he made a gesture of deprecation; he sought for some word to say to her, and found nothing. More and more ill at ease, he decided on giving her a kiss, but she withdrew; she did not want him to touch her any more.

"I must be going off," he murmured. "You stay here a little."

She made no answer, looking upwards, her gaze lost in the sky.

"You will, won't you? Wait five minutes so that you won't be seen coming out at the same time as me."

Then she brought herself to open her mouth.

"All right, you go!"

And that was all. He cracked his whip, swore at his horses, and went off by the side of his cart, walking at a slow pace, with a bent head.

Buteau, meanwhile, was amazed at losing sight of Françoise behind the wheat, and when he saw Jean moving away he had a suspicion. Without confiding it to Lise, he set off, crouching down like a wily sportman. Then with one bound he dropped right into the centre of the straw at the bottom of the hole. Françoise, invaded by a growing lassitude, had not stirred—her vague eyes were still turned skywards, her legs were still bare. Denial was impossible; she did not even attempt it.

"Ah, bitch! trollop! So that's the beggar that has you. And *me*—you treat *me* to kicks in the stomach. By God! we'll soon see!"

He had hold of her already. She read plainly in his flushed face that he meant to profit by the opportunity; and why not with him, now that the other had been there? But as soon as she felt his burning hands once more on her, her original revolt seized her again. He was there, and she no longer regretted him nor wanted him, and unconscious herself of how her will leapt and altered, her whole being was stirred to bitter, jealous protest.

"Let go of me, hog! . . . I'll bite you."

For the second time he was compelled to give way. But he gasped with rage, was furious at this pleasure which had been had without him.

"Ah! I suspected you together! I ought to have given him the bloody chuck long ago. Blasted whore! to have your hide tanned by a nasty bugger like that!"

And the torrent of filthy abuse poured on; he pelted her with every abominable word, spoke of the action with a crudity which stripped her naked, shamefully. She, angered also, white and stiff, affected an extreme calmness, answered each foul speech in curt tones.

"What business is it of yours? If I like it, aren't I free to do it?"

"All right! And I—I'll chuck you out of doors. Yes, at once, directly we get back. I shall tell the thing to Lise, how I've found you with your shift up to your neck. And you can go and be blocked somewhere else, since it amuses you."

By this time he was driving her in front of him, bringing her back to the field where his wife waited.

"Tell Lise! I shall go if I want to."

"If you want to; ah! that's what we'll see. . . . With a kick in your backside."

To make a short cut, he made her cross the Cornailles field, which had remained undivided between her sister and herself—

the field whose partition he had always postponed. And suddenly he stopped aghast; an idea had just stung his mind. He saw in a flash that if he drove her out the field would be cut in two: she would take half of it with her, give it to her lover, perhaps. The notion froze him; it caused the exasperation of his desire to melt away completely. No, that was stupid to give up everything because a girl once had a frolic—that's to be got again; but land, when one has hold of it, it's best to keep it tight. He said nothing more; he walked on slackening his pace, in disgust, not knowing how he could recall his violence before they rejoined his wife. At last he came to a conclusion.

"For my part, I don't like bad-hearted folk. It's because you seemed to be disgusted with me that I was vexed . . . Otherwise I've no wish to make my wife unhappy, in her condition . . ."

She believed that he was afraid she, on her side, would betray him to Lise.

"You may be very sure that if you speak I speak too."

"Oh, I'm not afraid," he answered with calm indifference. "I shall say you're a liar, that it's your revenge on me for having caught you."

Then, as they arrived, he concluded in a rapid voice:

"Well, let it rest between us. We must see if we can talk it over together."

Lise, however, began to feel astonished; she did not understand why Françoise had come back like this with Buteau. The latter described how the little sluggard had been sulking, up yonder, behind a rick. However, a hoarse cry interrupted them, and the thing was forgotten.

"What's up? Who was that screamed?"

It was a terrible cry, a long, low howl, like the death cry of an animal having its throat cut. It rose and sank again, while the sun flamed on unmercifully.

"Hark! what is it? It's a horse, I expect, broken some bones."

They looked round and saw Palmyre, still on her legs in the adjacent stubble, in the midst of the sheaves. With her failing arms she gripped against her flat breast one last shock that she tried to bind. But she uttered a fresh cry of anguish, more piercing and infinitely distressed; then, dropping everything, she spun round for a moment and fell upon the corn, struck by the sun which had beaten upon her for twelve hours.

Lise and Françoise ran up, Buteau followed them at a more leisurely pace; whilst, from the fields adjacent, everybody came also—the Delhommes, Fouan, who was pottering about there, and La Grande, knocking up stones with the end of her stick.

"What's up?"

"Palmyre has had a fit."

"I saw her fall from over yonder."

"Merciful God!"

All grouped around her in the mysterious awe with which the presence of sickness inspires the peasantry, looked at her without venturing to come close. She lay at full length, her face turned skywards, her arms in the form of a cross as though she had been crucified upon the earth, which had worn her out so quickly in its hard service, and now had killed her. She must have broken some blood-vessel; a thin stream of blood trickled from her mouth. But exhaustion, more than anything, had done for her; she had laboured like a beast of burden, seemed so withered in the midst of the stubble, reduced to such nothingness, that she was no more than an old rag, without flesh or sex, as she breathed her last weak breath amid the rich fruitfulness of the harvest. La Grande, however, the grand-mother, who had disowned her and never spoken to her, came forward at last.

"I believe she's dead."

She touched her with her stick. The body, its eyes wide open and vacant in the dazzling light, the mouth gaping to the winds of heaven, did not stir. The little stream of blood was congealing upon the chin. Then the grand-mother, who had stooped down, added:

"I am sure she is dead . . . That's better than living on other people."

All were struck dumb; nobody stirred. Could they touch her, or must they send for the Mayor? At first they spoke in whispers; then they began shouting in order to make each other understand.

"I will go and fetch my ladder; it's over yonder by the rick," Delhomme said finally. "It will do for a bier. A dead person must never be left to lie on the ground; it's not right."

But when he came back with the ladder and they wanted to take some corn sheaves to make a bed for the corpse, Buteau grumbled.

"You'll get your corn back."

"Damn it, I reckon on it."

Lise, a little ashamed at such meanness, added two sheaves to form a pillow, and the body of Palmyre was laid upon it, whilst Françoise, in a sort of dream, thunderstruck at this death occurring in the middle of her first business with a man, was unable to take her eyes off the corpse. It made her very sad; she was astonished, especially, that it should ever have been a woman. So she stayed with Fouan, watching, waiting until it should be removed. The old man was equally silent; he seemed to be meditating upon the great happiness of those who pass away.

When the sun set, at the hour of home-coming, two men arrived to carry the bier. The burden was not heavy, there was no need to have relays. All, however, accompanied it; quite a procession was formed. They cut across fields, to avoid the windings of the road. The body, on its bed of corn, grew stiff; and the stalks behind the head fell over and waved about, to the measured paces of the bearers. Now the sky was free from all but the accumulated heat, a reddish heat that hung heavily in the blue atmosphere. Against the horizon, on the further side of the Loire valley, the sun, drowned in mist, only shed upon La Beauce a fringe of yellow rays, along the line of soil. All things were tinged in this yellow, the gold of fine evenings at harvest time.

The wheat that still stood wore a coronal of rose-coloured flame; the stubble was bright, the straw shining like silver-gilt; and on every side, as far as the eye could reach, dotting the golden sea, the ricks stood out, magnified out of all proportion, flaming on one side, already dark on the other, casting shadows which prolonged themselves until they were lost in the distance of the plain. A great calm was felt; only, very high up, a lark was singing. Amongst the weary harvesters no one spoke; they followed as resignedly as a flock of sheep, with lowered heads. Nothing was audible but a faint noise from the ladder, swaying beneath the dead woman, as they bore it through the ripe corn.

The same evening Hourdequin settled up with his harvesters, who had finished the work for which they were engaged. The men drew a hundred and twenty francs, the women sixty, for their month's work. It was a good year; there had not been too much wheat beaten down for the sickle to pass it by, there had been no storm during the reaping-time. So that it was in the midst of loud acclamations that the leader, followed by his gang, presented the sheaf, the cross of plaited ears, to Jacqueline, who was looked upon as the mistress of the house. And the harvest-supper, the traditional parting banquet, was very merry. They ate three legs of mutton, and five rabbits, and they drank toasts so long that they all went to bed tight. Jacqueline, who was drunk also, was very nearly caught by Hourdequin in Tron's arms. With his brain reeling, Jean went and threw himself down on the straw of his loft. In spite of his fatigue, he could not sleep: the image of Françoise returned and tortured him. It filled him with astonishment, almost with anger, for he had had so little pleasure from the girl, after all those nights which he had spent in longing for her. Since then he had felt quite blank; he could have sworn that it should not begin again. And here, he was hardly in bed when he saw her rise up before him, he desired her still, in a fury of sensual recollection. What they had done over yonder, the act which had given him so little gratification, came back to him now in its smallest detail, and the evocation

whipped his flesh. How was he to see her again, where should he clasp her to-morrow, and on the succeeding days, and always? A rustling noise made him start up. A woman crept in beside him. It was the woman from Perche, the harvester, astounded that he should not have come to her on the last night. At first he pushed her away; then he stifled her in an embrace; and had he been with the other one, so he would have crushed her, with straining limbs, until they swooned away.

At the same hour, Françoise awoke with a start, rose and opened the sky-light in her room, to get a breath of air. She had dreamt that there was fighting, and dogs were ravening at the door below. When the air had cooled her a little, she was overcome once more by the notion of the two men, the one who had wanted her, the other who had had her. And she reflected no further, it was a vague image in her mind, and she neither analyzed it nor came to a conclusion. But she pricked up her ears; it was not a dream, then? A dog was howling in the distance, by the side of the Aigre. Then she remembered; it was Hilarion, who since nightfall had stayed raving by the body of Palmyre. They had tried to drive him away, but he had stuck there, had bitten them, refusing to leave all that was left of his sister, his wife, his all; and he howled without ceasing, his cries filled the night. Françoise listened, trembling for a long time.

CHAPTER V

"If only La Coliche doesn't calve just when I'm brought to bed!" Lise repeated each morning.

And she dragged her huge belly into the shed, and forgot her trouble, while she watched the cow with anxious eyes: its own belly also had grown out of all proportion. One would have thought there never had been an animal which had swelled to such a degree. She was as round as a tub, and her legs looked quite slim. Her nine months were up on St. Fiarce's Day, for Françoise had been careful to write down the date on which day she had taken her to the bull. Unhappily it was Lise who was doubtful about her own condition by a few days. The child had come so strangely, without being wanted, that she could not tell. But it would certainly befall within a short time of St. Fiacres Day, perhaps the day before it, perhaps the day after. And she repeated distractedly:

"If only La Coliche doesn't calve just when I'm brought to bed! That would be a business. My word! we should have a nice time!"

They made a deal of La Coliche, who had been one of the establishment for the last ten years. They had come to look upon her as a member of the family. The Buteaus took refuge with her in winter, and had no other warmth than the hot exhalation from her body. And the cow herself was very affectionate, especially to Françoise. She licked her with her rough tongue, until she almost drew blood; she took hold of bits of her petticoat with her teeth, to draw her attention and keep her by her side. So that they looked after her all the more as her time of calving drew near; there was hot broth, expeditions to see her at odd moments of the day, an hourly watch kept over her. It was not only that they were fond of her, but there was also the

fifty pistoles that she represented, the milk and butter and cheese, quite a fortune that they would lose in losing her.

A fortnight had elapsed since harvest. Françoise had resumed her ordinary life in the household, as though nothing had passed between Buteau and herself. He seemed to have forgotten, she herself avoided thinking of those things which troubled her. Jean, whom she had run across and had warned, had not returned. He watched for her at hedge corners, and entreated her to run off and meet him, in the evening, at certain ditches that he indicated. But she refused in alarm, hiding her coldness beneath an appearance of great caution. Later, perhaps, when she was less needed at home. And one evening when he had taken her by surprise, when she had gone down to Macqueron's to buy some sugar, she was firm in her refusal to go with him behind the church. She spoke all the time of La Coliche; some bones were beginning to give way, the buttocks were gaping—certain signs, which made him declare himself that it wouldn't be much longer now.

And now, on the very eve of St. Fiarce's day, Lise was seized, in the evening after dinner, with frightful pains, just as she had gone to the shed with her sister, and was watching the cow, who was in pain also, her legs forced apart by her swollen belly, and who was lowing softly.

"Didn't I tell you so?" she cried angrily. "Ah, here's a nice job."

Bent double, she clasped her womb in both hands, with a rough gesture, as though she would punish it; she spoke aloud to it, abused it: wouldn't it leave her alone, blast it? it might just as well wait! It felt as if a multitude of flies were stinging her sides; and the pains began in her loins, and went down as low as the knees. She refused to go to bed, and stamped her feet on the ground, repeating that she would make it shut up.

About ten o'clock, when little Jules had been put to bed, Buteau, irritated at finding nothing happen, made up his mind to sleep; he left Lise and Françoise, who remained obstinately

in the shed, standing over La Coliche, whose sufferings were increasing. Both began to feel anxious; it was not going well at all, although the labour, as far as the bones were concerned, seemed to be over. There was a clear passage; why didn't the calf come out? They coaxed the creature, encouraged her, brought her dainties, some sugar, which she refused, drooping her head, her back shaken by convulsive shivers. At midnight, Lise, who had been writhing till then, found herself suddenly relieved; it was not her time yet, but only a false alarm, transitory pains; and she was convinced that she had withheld it just as she might have resisted a call of nature. And for the whole night she and her sister watched over La Coliche, nursing her and heating cloths, whilst the other cow, Rougette, the latest purchase at Cloyes Market, astounded at the burning candle, followed them with her big, sleepy eyes.

At sunrise, Françoise, seeing that there was still no progress, resolved to run and fetch their neighbour, La Frimat. She was famed for her knowledge; she had tended so many cows that people resorted to her readily in difficult cases in order to save calling in the veterinary. As soon as she arrived, she puckered up her face.

"She looks very bad," she murmured. "How long has this gone on?"

"For the last twelve hours."

The old woman continued peering behind the cow; she poked her nose in everywhere, with little shakes of her chin and ominous grimaces which alarmed the other two.

"And yet," she concluded, "the bottle is come. We must wait and see."

Thereupon, all the morning was spent in watching the "bottle" form, the bladder swollen with the water and forced outside. They studied it, measured it, criticised it. All the same, it was as good a bottle as any, although it stretched out so and was too big. But by nine o'clock the labour was again at a standstill; the "bottle" hung stationary,—it was deplorable—

waved to and fro in regular motions with the convulsive shudders of the cow, whose condition was growing visibly worse. When Buteau came in to breakfast, he took alarm in his turn; he talked of going to fetch Patoir, although he trembled at the notion of the money it would cost.

"A vet.!" said La Frimat sourly. "So that he may kill her? He finished Daddy Saucisse's cow well enough, before his eyes. No, look here, I shall break the 'bottle' and have a look for your calf myself."

"But," Françoise put in, "Monsieur Patoir says it musn't be broken. He says that the water it's full of, helps."

La Frimat shrugged her shoulders exasperatedly. Patoir was a precious donkey! And with one stroke of the scissors she cut the bladder. The water rushed out with a noise as if a sluice had been opened; they drew back, but too late, and they were all splashed. For a moment La Coliche breathed more easily; the old woman was triumphant. She rubbed some butter on her right hand, and introduced it, trying to discover the position of the calf; she moved it about inside leisurely. Lise and Françoise watched her actions, blinking their eyes with anxiety. Buteau himself, who had not gone back to his fields, waited motionless, holding his breath.

"I can feel the feet," she murmured, "but the head is not there. That's bad when you can't find the head."

She had to remove her hand. La Coliche was seized with a violent spasm, and she made such an effort that the feet emerged.

That was something: the Buteaus gave a sigh of relief. They thought they had a bit of their calf at any rate, now they saw the feet protruding. And after that they were exercised by one thought alone, to drag and get it out at once, as though they feared it might go in again and not reappear.

"It would be best not to hustle it," said Françoise prudently. "It will come out of itself at last."

That was Françoise's opinion. But Buteau was disturbed; he kept on feeling the feet every few minutes; worrying himself

because they made no progress. Suddenly he took a rope and with his wife's assistance—she was as nervous as himself—tied a strong knot in it. And just as La Bécu entered, as if she had had a sort of instinct of the thing, they all hung on to the rope and pulled, Buteau first, then La Frimat, La Bécu, Françoise, and Lise herself, squatting down on account of her unwieldy belly.

"Pull-a-hoy!" cried Buteau. "All together! Oh, the fellow hasn't budged an inch; he's fixed there tight. A-hoy! Out, you bugger!"

The women, sweating and panting, repeated:

"Pull-a-hoy!—A-hoy! Out, you bugger!"

But there was a disaster. The rope, an old half rotten one, broke, and they were all thrown down on the straw, to a chorus of cries and oaths.

"It's nothing, there's no harm done!" declared Lise, who had rolled against the wall, and whom they hastened to pick up. However, she was hardly on her feet before she felt giddy and had to sit down. A quarter of an hour later she was holding her stomach, the pains of last night began again; they were horrible and came at regular intervals. And she thought she had put it off! What beastly luck, anyhow, that the cow didn't go any faster; and she herself was taken so bad again that she was likely to catch up with the animal! One can't avoid one's fate, and it was written that both of them should be brought to bed together. She gave great moans, and a quarrel broke out between her man and her. God's truth! What had she gone and tugged for? What had she got to do with the insides of others? She had better empty out her own inside first. She was in such pain that she answered with abuse. Hog! Blackguard! if it hadn't been for him, filling her inside, it wouldn't hurt her so.

"All this," La Frimat interposed, "is mere talk. It doesn't bring us any further."

And La Bécu added:

"It's comforting, all the same."

Luckily, they had sent little Jules off to his cousin Delhomme to have him out of the way. It was three o'clock, they waited till seven. Nothing came; the house was like hell, with Lise on one side, fixed there obstinately on an old chair, writhing and moaning; on the other, La Coliche, keeping up a constant bellow, as she was seized with cold sweat and shuddering fits, of an increasingly grave character. The second cow, Rougette, had begun to bellow from fear. Then Françoise lost her head, and Buteau, shouting and swearing, wanted to pull again. He called in two neighbours, and they pulled, six together, as though they were going to root up a tree, on a new rope, which this time did not break. But La Coliche fell upon her side in exhaustion, and lay on the straw, at full length, panting piteously.

"We'll never get the bugger!" declared Buteau, "and we'll lose the old girl, too."

Françoise folded her hands in supplication.

"Oh, go and fetch Monsieur Patoir! Let it cost what it will, go and fetch Monsieur Patoir!"

He had grown gloomy. After a last struggle, he brought out the cart without a word.

La Frimat, who affected to have no further interest in the cow, since they had spoken of the veterinary again, was anxious now about Lise. She was good at accouchements also, and all her neighbours passed through her hands. And she seemed anxious; she did not hide her fears from La Bécu, who recalled Buteau as he was harnessing the horse.

"Listen . . . Your wife is in great pain. Suppose you brought back a doctor, too?"

He remained silent, with his eyes grown very round. What! Was there somebody else who had to be coddled? He was quite sure he wouldn't pay for everybody.

"No, no!" cried Lise, in an interval between two spasms. "I shall do all right, I shall. We've no money to throw out of window."

Buteau was quick to whip up his horse, and the cart vanished in the thick darkness of the road to Cloyes. When Patoir arrived, two hours later, he found everything in the same condition, La Coliche moaning on her side, and Lise writhing like a worm, half-fallen from her chair. The thing had lasted for four and twenty hours.

"Look here, which am I sent for?" asked the veterinary, who had a merry wit. And immediately addressing Lise as thou:

"Well, then, my good woman, if it's not for you, oblige me by putting yourself into bed; you want it."

She made no answer, but she stayed where she was. He was already examining the cow.

"Gad! She's in a damned bad way, your beast. You always send for me too late. And you've been tugging, I can see that. Ay? you would sooner burst her in two, than wait, you damned blunderheads!"

They all listened to him, with abashed faces, and expressions of respectful despair; La Frimat, alone, pursed up her lips, and was full of contempt. He took off his overcoat, turned up his sleeves; he pushed in the feet again, having first tied a thread round, in order that he might recover them; then he thrust in his right hand.

"By Jove!" he went on, after a moment, "it's just as I thought. The head is twisted round to the left, you might have pulled till to-morrow, and it would never have come out. And, you know, my friends, it's all up with your calf. I've no mind to cut my fingers on it trying to pull it round. Besides I should be no more likely to get it, and I should do for the mother."

Françoise burst out sobbing.

"Monsieur Patoir, I implore you, save our cow. This poor Coliche, who's so fond of me."

And Lise, also, who was livid from a spasm, and Buteau, who was in strong health, and was hard enough towards his neighbours' ills, were touched and lamented in a common supplication.

" Save our cow, our old cow, that's given such good milk for years and years. Save her, Monsieur Patoir! "

" Let's us understand each other, then; I shall be obliged to cut up the calf."

" Oh, the calf, a bloody lot the calf matters! Save our cow, Monsieur Patoir, save her! "

Then the veterinary, who had brought a big blue apron with him, borrowed some linen trousers; and having undressed completely in a corner, behind Rougette, he simply put on the trousers and tied the apron round his waist. When he re-appeared, with his honest face, like a mastiff's, looking stout and short in his airy costume, La Coliche raised her head and stopped moaning, in astonishment, no doubt. But nobody even smiled, their hearts were so heavy with expectation.

" Light some candles! "

He made them set four on the ground, and he lay down on his stomach on the straw behind the cow, who was no longer able to rise. For a moment he laid flat, with his face between the animal's thighs. Then he decided to pull the string, to bring the feet down, and he examined them intently. He had put down a little, long box near him, and he raised himself on one elbow to take a knife from it, when a hoarse groan made him sit up in astonishment.

" What! you're still there, my good woman? So! I said to myself, that's not the cow! "

It was Lise who uttered it; the greater pains had seized her, tore her sides asunder.

" But, good Heavens! Can't you go and get your job over by yourself, and let me do mine here! It puts me out, it gets on my nerves, upon my word, to hear you howling at my back. Now, look here, is there any sense in it? Take her away, some of you! "

La Frimat and La Bécu decided to take hold of Lise, one seizing each arm, and to lead her to her room. She gave in, she had no longer the strength to resist. But as she crossed the

kitchen, where a single candle was burning, she asked, nevertheless, that all the doors might be left open, feeling that so she would be less far away. La Frimat had already prepared the lying-in bed, according to the country custom: a single sheet thrown in the middle of the room over a truss of straw and three chairs put upside down. Lise squatted down and fixed herself on it; her back rested against one of the chairs, her right leg against the second, her left leg against the third. She was not even undressed; her feet stuck out in their old shoes, her blue stockings were up to her knees.

Buteau and Françoise had remained in the shed to hold a light for Patoir. Both squatted on their heels, and each held a candle near, while the veterinary, once more lying at full length, cut a section with his knife round the left thigh. He cut through the skin and pulled on the shoulder, which he stripped and laid bare. But Françoise, pale and faint, dropped her candle and ran off crying:

"My poor old Coliche! I won't see it, I won't see it!"

Patoir lost his temper; and all the more because he had to get up and extinguish an incipient conflagration; the straw had caught when the candle fell.

"Good God! What a girl! She's got nerves like a princess! She would smoke us all like so many hams."

Françoise had run and thrown herself down on a chair in the room where her sister was lying-in. The latter's bursting condition did not disturb her; it seemed something quite natural and ordinary after what she had just seen. She made a gesture, dismissing the vision of mangled, live flesh, and stammered an account of what they were doing to the cow.

"It can't go on, I must get back," said Lise suddenly; and in spite of her pain she lifted herself up to leave her three chairs. But already La Frimat and La Bécu, in high dudgeon, were holding her down.

"Come, now, will you be quiet? You've got the devil in your body!"

And La Frimat added:

"Good! Now *you've* gone and broken your 'bottle.'"

In effect, the water poured out with a sudden gush, and was promptly absorbed by the straw beneath the sheet, and the last throes of expulsion began. The naked womb made involuntary efforts, it was swollen to bursting, while her legs, in their blue stockings, opened and shut again with the mechanical movements of a jumping frog.

"Look here," resumed La Bécu, "to keep you quiet, I'll go and get news for you."

After that she did nothing but run to and fro from the room to the shed. At last, to save her legs, she shouted out her news from the middle of the kitchen. The veterinary went on cutting out pieces; the straw was soaked with blood and matter; it was a painful and filthy task, from which he issued in an abominable state, spattered from head to foot.

"It's going all right, Lise!" cried La Bécu. "Push away, and don't be afraid! We've got the other shoulder, and now they're getting out the head. . . . He's got it! The head! Oh, what a head! And it's done, this time the body's come in one mass."

Lise greeted each detail of the operation with a heart-broken sigh. It was impossible to tell whether it was on her own account or the cow's that she suffered. Suddenly Buteau appeared with the head, which he wanted to show her. There was a general exclamation:

"Oh, what a lovely calf!"

She, in the midst of her labour, with fiercer efforts, her muscles straining, her thighs swollen, was seized with uncontrollable despair.

"Lord! Lord! what a misfortune! . . . Such a lovely calf! Lord, Lord! . . . What a misfortune! Such a lovely calf! a lovely calf! I've never seen a finer calf."

Françoise joined in her lamentations, and everybody's regrets became so aggressive, so full of hostile suggestion, that Patoir

was annoyed at them. He ran round; stopping at the door, however, out of modesty.

"Look here, I warned you! . . . You entreated me to save your cow. You see, I know you, my fine people! Don't go and tell everybody that I killed your calf, d'you hear?"

"To be sure," Buteau murmured, following him back into the shed, "to be sure! All the same, it was you who cut it up."

Lise on the floor, between her three chairs, was seized by a sort of wave, which ran down her sides beneath the skin, to finish at the termination of her thighs in a continual widening of the flesh. And Françoise, who hitherto absorbed in her grief had not looked, was struck dumb with astonishment, as she stood in the front of her sister, whose nakedness she saw foreshortened, nothing but the angles of her knees in relief, to right and left of the curve of her womb, in which a round cavity gaped.

"A little more patience," declared La Frimat. "It's soon over."

She was on her knees between the legs, watching the child in readiness to receive it. But it took its own time, as La Bécu said; for an instant even it disappeared; they thought it had gone in again. It was only then that Françoise could take her fascinated eyes off; and she was somewhat troubled, caught hold of her sister's hand, feeling sorry for her now that she wasn't looking.

"Poor Lise, then! it must be painful!"

"Oh, yes! oh, yes! and nobody pities me. If only they pitied me! Oh, me, me! it's beginning again. Will it never come out?"

It still showed no signs of ending when exclamations reached them from the shed. Patoir, astonished at finding La Coliche still restless and moaning, had suspected the presence of a second calf; and, in effect, after making a dive with his hand, he had pulled one out, without any difficulty this time, just as he would have taken a handkerchief from his pocket. The big, merry man's amusement at this was so keen, that forgetting his modesty,

he ran in to the lying-in chamber, carrying the calf, followed by Buteau, who was also jesting.

"There, my good woman! You wanted one, there it is."

And he was an irresistibly funny sight: his apron covering his nakedness; his arms, his face, his whole body streaked with dung as he held the still reeking calf, which looked as if it were drunk, with its unwieldy, startled head.

In the midst of the general outcry, Lise was seized when she saw him with a fit of mad laughter, irresistible, interminable.

"Oh, how queer he looks! Oh, ain't it stupid to make me laugh like this! Oh! la, la! I'm in such pain; it's killing me. No, no! don't make me laugh any more, let me bide!"

Her laughter pealed out: it started in her plump bosom, it descended to her stomach, where it rolled out with the sound of a tempest. Her sides shook, and the child's head had resumed its game of push—it was like a bullet on the point of exploding.

But it was the last straw when the veterinary, having set the calf down in front of him, attempted to wipe off the sweat which poured off his forehead with the back of his hand. He scarred himself with a great streak of cow-dung. Everybody held their sides; the woman who was being brought to bed almost choked, and her laughter was interspersed with shrill cries, like those of a hen who has laid an egg.

"I'm dying; oh, stop! It's a bloody lark to make a-body laugh till she bursts. Oh, Lord! Lord! It's killing me!"

Suddenly, as though the woman had been a cannon, the child shot out; it was quite red, its extremities white and reeking. There was nothing but a gurgling noise, as though some giant vessel were being emptied. The infant set up a cry, whilst the mother, shaken like a leather bottle at the point of bursting, laughed more than ever. At one end there was crying, at the other laughter. And Buteau slapped his thighs, La Bécu held her sides, Patoir burst out sonorously, and Françoise herself—her sister had crushed her hand in her last struggle—Françoise gave vent to her long continued need.

"It's a girl," declared La Frimat.

"No, no! said Lise, "I won't have it, I want a boy."

"Then I'll poke it in again, my pretty, and you shall make a boy to-morrow."

The laughter was redoubled; people were quite ill from it. Then, the calf being still there, in front of them, the woman who had just been confined, growing calm at last, said regretfully:

"The other was such a beauty! Anyhow, we should have had two."

Patoir went off, having first seen that La Coliche was given three pints of sweet wine. In the bedroom, La Frimat was undressing Lise and putting her to bed, whilst La Bécu, assisted by Françoise, removed the straw and swept up. In ten minutes everything was in good order, no one would have suspected that a confinement had taken place, had it not been for the incessant wailing of the infant, which was being washed in warm water. But when it was thoroughly cleaned, and laid in its cradle, its cries gradually ceased; and the mother, by this time quite exhausted, sank into a leaden sleep; her face, where the blood had congested, looked almost black, against the coarse sheets of brown linen. About eleven o'clock, when the two neighbours had gone, Françoise told Buteau that he had better go upstairs and sleep in the hay-loft. She had prepared for the night, by throwing a mattress on the floor, she meant to stretch herself upon it, so that she need not leave her sister. He made no answer, silently smoked his pipe. A great quiet was established; nothing was heard except the heavy breathing of the sleeping Lise. Just as Françoise was kneeling on her mattress, at the very foot of the bed, in a shaded corner, Buteau, still silent, came up suddenly and pushed her over from behind. She looked round, and understood, with the first glimpse of his red, distorted face. It was on him again; he had not given up his idea of having her; and it was probable that it exercised him strongly, in sudden gusts, that he should attempt it as he did, at his wife's side, after the not particularly agreeable things which had happened. She

pushed him off, upset him. There was a silent, breathless struggle.

He sneered in a choked whisper:

"Come, what's your bloody objection? I am good enough for both of you."

He knew her so well, was aware that she would not cry out. In effect, she resisted without a word, too proud to call her sister, unwilling that anyone, even the latter, should know of these attempts. He pressed her hard, was on the point of victory.

"It will be all right. We live together, we're not going to part."

But he had to smother a cry of pain. Without speaking, she had driven her nails into his neck; and he grew furious now, he made an allusion to Jean.

"Do you think you'll marry him, your blackguard? Never, so long as you're under age!"

This time, as he was forcing her, under her petticoats, with a brutal directness, she gave him such a kick between the legs that he yelled. With one bound he was on his feet, he looked in alarm at the bed. But his wife still slept, her breath came with the same calm regularity. However, he went off with fiercely threatening gesture.

When Françoise had stretched herself on her mattress, in the great calm of the room, she remained with her eyes open. She would never consent, she would never let him do it, even if she had the desire. And she was filled with astonishment; for, hitherto, the thought that she might marry Jean had not come to her.

CHAPTER VI

For the last two days Jean had been employed on the fields which Hourdequin owned, hard by Rognes, and where the latter had installed a steam threshing-machine, hired from a Châteaudun engineer, who sent it round from Bonneval to Cloyes. The young man brought the sheaves from ricks in the neighbourhood with his two-horsed wagon; then conveyed the grain to the farm; whilst the machine, panting from morning to night, sent a cloud of white dust flying in the sunshine, and filled the country with a loud and ceaseless hum.

Jean was ill, racking his brains to discover some means of again confronting Françoise. A month had already elapsed since he had hold of her, hard by, in the corn that they were now threshing, and ever since she had been timid and had eluded him. He began to despair of ever repeating it. It was a growing desire, an invading passion; as he led his team, he asked himself why he should not go frankly to the Buteaus, and ask Françoise in marriage. So far there had been nothing to cause an open and definite breach between them. He always bade them good-day when they passed. And now that this idea of marriage had struck him as the only means of regaining the girl, he persuaded himself that it was his duty, that he would be acting dishonourably if he did not marry her. The day after, however, when Jean came back to the machine, he was seized with fear. He would never have risked the attempt, had he not seen Buteau and Françoise start off together for their fields. He remembered that Lise had always been well disposed to him; he would be less nervous with her, and he got off for a moment, having left his horses in charge of a mate.

"What, it's you, Jean!" cried Lise, who had recovered grandly from her confinement. "We never see you now. What's the matter?"

He apologized. Then, hurriedly, with the brutal directness of shy persons, he broached the matter; and she might have imagined at first that he was making a declaration to herself, for he reminded her that he had loved her and wished her to be his wife. But he added, suddenly:

"So that's why, anyhow, I would marry Françoise, if you would give her to me."

She looked at him in such surprise that he began to stammer.

"Oh, I know it's not done like that. I only wanted to speak to you about it."

"Gracious!" she said at last, "I'm surprised at it, because I wasn't expecting it, owing to your ages. . . . Before everything, we must find out what Françoise thinks."

He had come with a formal project of telling her everything, in the hope of making the marriage necessary. But, at the last moment, a scruple prevented him. If Françoise had not confessed to her sister, if no one knew anything, had he any right to speak first? That discouraged him; he felt ashamed on account of his thirty-three years.

"To be sure," he murmured, "she would have to be spoken to, she musn't be forced to anything."

Otherwise, Lise, her astonishment once surmounted, considered him with a delighted air; and, obviously, the project did not displease her. She was even quite encouraging.

"It shall be as she likes, Jean. I'm not of Buteau's opinion, that she's too young. She's nearly eighteen, and the way she's built, she might take two men instead of one. . . . And then, two sisters, they may be fond of each other, mayn't they? Only, now she's a woman, I'd liefer have a servant in her place, whom I could order about. Marry her, if she says yes. You're a good sort; it's the old cocks that are the best often."

It was the cry of their gradual estrangement which escaped her, which had sprung up inevitably between her younger sister and herself; a hostility aggravated by the little daily rubs, a dumb ferment of jealousy and dislike which had been smoulder-

ing ever since a man had come there, with his male wishes and appetites.

Jean was delighted: he set a big kiss on each of her cheeks, then she added:

"It just happens, we're christening Baby to-day, and we've got the family coming to dinner this evening. I invite you; you can make your request to Daddy Fouan—he's her guardian—if Françoise will have you."

"That's agreed," he cried. "Till this evening!"

And he rejoined his horses with great strides; he tended them all day, making his whip whistle; its cracks resounded like pistol shots on the morning of a *fête*.

In effect, the Buteaus were christening their baby after a great deal of delay. To begin with, Lise had insisted that she should be quite strong again, as she wished to partake of the good things. Then, exercised by an ambitious fit, she had set herself on getting the Charles for god-parents; and they having condescended to accept, it had been necessary to wait for Madame Charles, who had gone to Châtres to lend a hand in her daughter's business. The September fair was in progress, and the house in the Rue aux Juifs was never without company. Otherwise, as Lise told Jean, it was to be merely a family party: Fouan, La Grande, and the Delhommes, besides the god-father and the god-mother.

At the last minute, however, there was a great crop of difficulties with the Abbé Godard, who lived now in a perpetual feud with Rognes. He had forced himself to put up with his sore patiently, the four miles that each Mass cost him, the wearisome demands of a village which had no true religion, so long as he had any hope that the Municipal Council would end by treating itself to the luxury of a parish. Short of resigning he was unable to coax any more from them; the Council refused each year to restore the presbytery—Hourdequin, the mayor, declared that the expenditure was too burdensome already; the deputy, Macqueron, alone treated priests with consideration, owing to some stealthy ambitious schemes he cherished; and the Abbé,

having henceforward nothing to gain by compromise, treated Rognes roughly, gave it no more ritual than was strictly necessary, and withheld all luxuries, such as additional prayers, and candles, and incense, burnt for the pleasure of the thing. In June, particularly, a regular war was waged round the question of the first Communion. Five children—two girls and three boys—attended the Catechism which he held on Sunday after Mass, and as he would have had to return in order to confess them, he insisted that they should come themselves and find him at Bazoches-le-Doyen. That caused the first revolt of the women. Thank you! Three quarters of a league there, and the same back! Who knew what might happen when boys and girls are let loose together? Then the storm broke out in all its fury when he flatly refused to celebrate the ceremony at Rognes, to sing High Mass, and so on. He meant to celebrate it in his own parish; the five children were free to come there if they wished to. For a fortnight, at the fountain, the women's voices were shrill with anger. What did it mean, pray? He baptized them, married them, buried them at home, and he wouldn't let them communicate there decently. He stuck out obstinately: only said a Low Mass, and dismissed the five communicants without a flower or an *oremus* of consolation. He was even brutal to the women, when in tears at this mutilated solemnity they implored him to sing Vespers. Nothing at all! He gave them what was due to them. They could have had High Mass and Vespers, and, in short, everything at Bazoches if their obstinacy hadn't set them in rebellion against God. Since his quarrel, a rupture was imminent between the Abbé Godard and Rognes; the least shock would bring on the catastrophe. When Lise went to see the Curé about the baby's baptism, he spoke of fixing it for Sunday, after Mass. But she begged him to come over on Tuesday, at two o'clock, for the god-mother would not return from Châtres till the morning of that day. And he ended by consenting, advising her to be punctual; he was determined, he cried, not to wait a second.

On Tuesday, at two o'clock precisely, the Abbé Godard was

at the church. He was out of breath from his walk, and wetted by a sharp shower. Nobody had arrived yet. There was only Hilarion, at the entrance to the nave, employed in clearing out a corner of the baptistery, which was blocked with old broken paving-stones, which had always been seen there. Since his sister's death, the idiot lived on public charity, and the Curé, who, from time to time, slipped a franc into his hand, had taken it into his head to employ him at this task, which had been determined on twenty times, and as ceaselessly postponed. For a few minutes he looked on at the work with interest. Then he had a first attack of wrath.

"What, are they making a fool of me? It is ten past two, already."

As he looked across the square, at the silent house of the Buteaus, with its slumbering aspect, he caught sight of the gamekeeper, waiting under the porch, smoking his pipe.

"Ring then, Bécu!" he cried. "That will make them come —the slowcoaches!"

Bécu, very drunk as usual, hung on to the bell-rope. The priest had gone to put on his surplice. Since last Sunday he had prepared the entry on the register; he counted on hurrying over the ceremony by himself, without the assistance of the choir boys, who made him swear so. When everything was ready, he became once more impatient. Ten more minutes elapsed, the bell continued ringing, with obstinate exasperation, in the midst of the great silence of the deserted village.

"But what are they doing? Shall we have to drag them here by the ears?"

At last he saw La Grande come out from the Buteaus'; she walked with the air of some wicked old queen, as erect and firm as a thistle for all her eighty-four years. The family were disturbed and uneasy. Everybody who had been invited was there, except the god-mother, whom they had waited for vainly all the morning; and M. Charles in confusion ceaselessly repeated that it was very surprising, that he had only had a letter from her last

night, that certainly Madame Charles must have been delayed at Cloyes, and would arrive at any moment. Lise was anxious, knowing that the Curé was not at all fond of waiting, and at last she had thought of sending La Grande to him to induce him to be patient.

"What now?" he asked from the distance; "is it to-day or to-morrow? I suppose you think Almighty God is at your beck and call?"

"They're coming, your Reverence, they're coming," replied the old woman with her impassive calm.

Hilarion was just then taking out the last remains of the paving stones, and he passed carrying a huge stone against his stomach. He swayed on his crooked legs, but did not falter; he was solid as a rock, and had sufficient muscular strength to lift an ox. His hare-lip slobbered, but his hard skin was not moistened by a drop of sweat.

The Abbé Godard, furious at La Grande's tranquillity, at once fell upon her.

"Let me ask you, La Grande, since you're here, whether you think it's charitable, rich as you are, to let your only grand-child beg on the highway?"

She answered harshly:

"The mother disobeyed me; the child's naught to me."

"Well, I've warned you enough; I repeat to you, you will go to hell with your hard heart. The other day, without what I gave him he would have died of hunger, and to-day I've been obliged to invent some work for him."

At the mention of hell, La Grande had smiled quietly. As she said herself, she knew too much; hell was in this world for poor folk. But the sight of Hilarion carrying the stones made her reflect more than the priest's threats. She was astonished; she would never have thought him so strong, with those legs like coat sleeves.

"If he wants work," she went on at last, "perhaps, all the same, some might be found for him."

"His place is with you; take him, La Grande!"

"I'll see; let him come to-morrow."

Hilarion, who had understood, fell to trembling so violently that he almost crushed his feet by letting his last piece of stone fall upon them. As he went away, he cast a further glance at his grand-mother, the glance of a beaten animal, terrified and obedient.

Another half-hour elapsed. Bécu stopped ringing and started to smoke his pipe again. And La Grande remained there, silent and imperturbable, as though her presence alone sufficed for the debt of politeness that was owing to the Curé. The latter, whose irritation was growing, went every minute to the church door to cast an angry glance across the deserted square at the Buteaus' house.

"Ring, then, Bécu!" he cried suddenly. "If they are not here in three minutes, I'm off."

Then, as the bell clashed furiously, sending the ancient crows flying off with hoarse croaks, they saw the Buteaus and their company issue one by one and cross the square. Lise was in consternation, the god-mother was still missing. They had decided to make their way slowly to the church in the hope that that would make her come. It was not a hundred yards, the Abbé Godard shouted out to hurry them.

"Look here, do you mean to make a fool of me? I have put myself out for you, and here I've been waiting for an hour! Hurry up, hurry up!"

And he pushed them before him into the baptistry—the mother, who carried the infant, the father, the grand-father Fouan, Uncle Delhomme and Aunt Fanny, even M. Charles, who was got up as god-father and looked very dignified in his black frock-coat.

"Your Reverence," asked Buteau, with an air of exaggerated humility which contained a suggestion of malice, "could you be so very kind as to wait a little longer?"

"Wait—for whom?"

"The god-mother, your Reverence!"

The Abbé Godard turned purple, as though an apoplexy were imminent. He choked, gasped out:

"Find another!"

Everybody looked at each other; Delhomme and Fanny shook their heads, Fouan declared:

"That's impossible, it would be a folly."

"A thousand pardons, your Reverence," said M. Charles, who thought that, as a man of education, he ought to explain matters, "it's our fault, and yet it's not our fault. My wife wrote to me, and said postitively she would be back this morning. She is at Châtres . . ."

The Abbé Godard gave a start; he was carried away, began to lose all restraint.

"At Châtres—Châtres! I'm sorry for you, Monsieur Charles, if you're mixed up in this. But this can't go on. No, no! I won't put up with it any longer." And he burst out:

"There's no limit to their outrages against God in my person; I meet with a fresh blow every time I come to Rognes. Well, I've threatened you often enough; I shall go off to-day, and I shan't return. Tell that to your mayor. Get a priest and pay him, if you want one. As for me, I shall speak to the bishop, I shall tell him what you are, I'm certain that he will support me. Yes, we'll see who will be punished. You can go and live without a priest, like the beasts."

They all listened to him curiously, but at heart with the complete indifference of practical people, who no longer feared his God of anger and punishment. What good was there in trembling or abashing themselves, in paying for pardon, since nowadays the idea of the devil made them laugh, and they had ceased to believe that the wind, and the hail, and the thunder, were in the hands of an avenging master. Surely it was waste of time; it was more important to be respectful to the government police: they were the stronger.

The Abbé Godard looked at Buteau, who was sneering; at La

Grande, who was disdainful; at Delhomme and Fouan even, who were unmoved beneath their air of deferential gravity; and his failure to reach these people completed the rupture.

"I'm quite aware your cows have more religion than you have. Good-bye! Savages, that you are—dip your child in the pond, if you want to baptize it!"

He ran to take off his surplice, crossed the church, and disappeared with such a tempestuous rush that the christening party, deserted in this manner, had not time to put in a word; they stood gaping at him with their wide-open eyes.

The worst of it all was, that at this moment, just as the Abbé Godard turned off into Macqueron's new street, a carriage was seen coming along the road, in which Madame Charles and Élodie were seated. The former explained that she had stopped at Châteaudun, being anxious to kiss her darling child, and that they had given her permission to carry her off for two days' holidays. She was terribly sorry for the delay; she hadn't even gone first to White Roses, to leave her trunk.

"We must run after the Curé," said Lise. "It's only dogs that are not baptized."

Buteau started off running, and they heard him, too, tearing down Macqueron's street. But the Abbé Godard had a start; the father had passed the bridge, climbed the hill, and only caught sight of him from the summit, at a bend in the road.

"Your Reverence! Your Reverence!"

Eventually he looked round and waited.

"What is it?"

"The god-mother's come. . . . You can't refuse baptism."

For a moment he did not stir. Then at the same furious pace he began to descend the hill again, following the peasant; and it was thus they re-entered the church, without having exchanged a word. The ceremony was hurried over: the priest rushed the god-father and god-mother through their creed, stripped the child, applied the salt, poured out the water fiercely. Already he was taking them to sign the register.

"Your Reverence," said Madame Charles, "I've a box of bon-bons for you, but it's in my trunk."

He made a gesture of acknowledgment and went off, repeating again, as he looked at them all:

"It's good-bye, this time!"

The Buteaus and their party, breathless from the rate at which he had taken them, watched him vanish round the corner of the square, his black cassock fluttering as he went. All the village was in the fields; there were only three urchins there, hankering after sweetmeats. In the midst of the great silence, they could hear the distant murmur of the steam threshing machine, which went on unceasingly. As soon as they had reached the house again—the gig was still waiting outside the door with the trunk—they all agreed to have a glass, since they were coming back to dine there that evening. Then, the glasses and two bottles being set out on the kitchen table, Madame Charles insisted on the trunk being carried in, so that she could produce the presents. She opened it, took out the dress and cap, which were a little late in arriving, and then produced six boxes of bon-bons, which she gave to the young mother.

"Is that from mamma's confectionery?" Élodie asked, as soon as she saw them.

Madame Charles seemed to be embarrassed for a moment. Then she said calmly:

"No, my pet, your mother doesn't go in for that sort."

And, turning towards Lise:

"You know, I thought of you as well, with regard to the linen. Old linen—there's nothing so useful in a household. I asked my daughter for it. I searched all through her cupboards."

At the mention of linen, all the family drew near—Françoise, La Grande, the Delhommes, even Fouan. Grouped round the trunk, they watched the old lady as she pulled out a parcel of odd pieces, white from constant scouring, yet retaining, in spite of the wash, a persistent odour of musk.

First there were some sheets of fine material, though they were ragged; then women's chemises, from which obviously lace trimming had been cut off. Madame Charles unfolded them, shook them out, explained:

"Lord! the sheets aren't new. It's a good five years they've been in use, and in time the contact of the body wears 'em out. You see, there's a big hole in the middle; but the edges are still good. You can cut a lot of things out of them."

They all poked their noses in, and felt them with appreciative nods of the head; the women especially, La Grande and Fanny, whose pursed-up lips denoted a secret envy. As for Buteau, he laughed silently, having several broad jokes on the tip of his tongue, but he repressed them out of respect; whilst Fouan and Delhomme showed their reverence for fine linen, after land the most satisfactory kind of wealth, by their seriousness.

"As for the chemises," continued Madame Charles, as she proceeded to unfold them, "just look! They are not worn out at all. Oh! there are tears, plenty of them—it's quite shocking. And since we can't always sew them up—it makes them so coarse after a time, and that doesn't look well—we find it better to throw them away with the old linen. But you, Lise, will find them very useful."

"Why, I'll wear them," cried the peasant woman. "It don't matter to me whether my chemise is darned or not."

"For my part," Buteau declared, with his cunning leer, winking his eye, "I should be glad enough if you would make me some handkerchiefs out of 'em."

This time they all laughed openly. Little Élodie, whose eyes had followed each sheet, each chemise, cried out:

"Oh, what a strange scent, it does smell strong! Is all that linen mamma's? "

Madame Charles did not show a moment's hesitation.

"To be sure it is, my darling. That's to say it's her shop-girls' linen. It's wanted, you know, in the business.

As soon as Lise had put it away, with the help of Françoise, in

the cupboard, they started drinking; they toasted the health of the child who had been christened, and whom the god-mother had called by her own Christian name, Laure. Then they filled up a minute or two in talk: M. Charles, seated on the trunk, was overheard questioning Madame Charles, without waiting to be alone with her, so anxious was he to hear how things were going on at Châtres. It was a passion with him still; he was always thinking of the establishment they had built up, years ago, so energetically, and had come to regret so much. The news was not good. To be sure, Estelle, their daughter, was handy and had a head on her shoulders; but decidedly, their son-in-law Vaucogne, that sawney Achille, was no good at all. He spent his days smoking pipes; he let everything spoil and go to pieces. For instance, the bedroom curtains were stained, the mirror in the little red parlour was cracked, the water jugs and basins were broken, and he never so much as interfered; and a man's arm was so indispensable if people were to be taught to treat the furniture with respect. At each fresh ravage which he heard of, M. Charles gave a sigh; his arms hung down, his pallor increased. One last grievance, which she whispered in a lower voice, finished him off.

"Then, he goes himself with the girl in Number 5, a big woman——"

"What's that you say?"

"Oh, I'm sure of it, I've seen them."

M. Charles clenched his fists tremulously, in a glow of exasperated indignation.

"The wretched fellow! Wearing out his staff, squandering his establishment! Oh, that's the last straw!"

Madame Charles imposed silence upon him with a gesture, for Élodie was coming in from the yard, where she had been to see the chickens. They emptied another bottle; the trunk was put in the gig once more; and the Charles followed it on foot to their own home. And everybody went off to cast an eye at his own house, until it was time for the feast. As soon as he was

alone, Buteau, disgusted at his wasted afternoon, took off his coat and started threshing on the paved side of the yard; for he wanted a sack of corn. But he soon got tired of threshing by himself; to put a heart in him, he required to hear the double rhythm of the flails, beating in chorus; and he called Françoise, who often helped in this task, with her strong back, and her arms which were as sturdy as those of a lad. In spite of the laborious lowness of this primitive fashion of threshing, he had always declined to purchase a horse threshing machine, declaring, like all the small proprietors, that he preferred only to thresh day by day as his needs required.

"Hullo, Françoise! are you coming?"

Lise, with her face peering into a mess of veal and carrots, had asked her sister to watch a brisket of pork that was on the spit; she tried to hinder her from obeying. But Buteau, who was not in a pleasant humour, said he would lick the two of them.

"God's truth, these womenkind! I'll empty your bloody saucepans down your throats! You must earn your bread all the more if you're going to fritter the house away stuffing a pack of strangers."

Françoise, who had already put on her old things for fear of grease spots, was obliged to follow him. She seized a flail with a long handle and a dog-wood head that were fastened together by copper bands. It was her own, and had become polished by use; some string was bound round it tightly to afford a good grip. She swung it in both hands over her head, then brought it down on the sheafs, which the beater, with its whole surface, struck with a sharp blow. And she never halted; she raised it high aloft, bent it as if it moved on hinges, and then dropped it with the measured mechanical movements of a blacksmith; whilst Buteau, in front of her, in reversed time did the same. Soon they warmed to their work, the music grew faster and nothing could be seen except these flying pieces of wood, which rebounded each time and sprang behind their heads, with the effect of the ceaseless straining of some bird with its feet tied by a string.

After ten minutes Buteau gave a low cry. The flails stopped, and he turned over the sheaf. Then the flails started again. At the end of ten more minutes he ordered a fresh halt, while he undid the sheaf. No less than six times it had to pass beneath the beaters; then the grain was completely detached from the ears, and the straw could be made into a bundle. One by one the sheaves succeeded each other. For two hours the only sound in the house was that from the regular knocks of the flails, dominated in the distance by the prolonged buzz of the steam threshing-machine.

Françoise by this time, with a flushed face, her wrists swollen, her whole skin burning, seemed to give out a sort of wave of flame which trembled visibly in the air. The breath came quickly from between her parted lips. Bits of straw stuck to the flying tresses of her hair. And with every blow, when she brought down her flail, her right knee strained against her petticoat, her breast and haunches protruded, making her bodice crack, a line was roughly suggested—the very nudity of her firm girlish body. Buteau saw the white flesh beneath the tanned line of her neck, a mass of flesh that the motion of her arm kept constantly surging, beneath the firm play of her shoulder muscles. He seemed to grow more excited at it, as at the strength of loin of some sturdy female, who warms to her work; and the flails hammered unceasingly, the grain leapt up, and fell in a shower beneath the panting blows of the two threshers. At a quarter to seven, when the daylight was waning, Fouan and the Delhommes put in an appearance.

"We must finish it," Buteau shouted to them, without stopping. "Show your grit now, Françoise!"

She made no objection, beat the harder, carried away by the rough work and the noise. And it was thus that Jean found them, when he arrived in his turn, having got permission to dine out. He was seized with a sudden spasm of jealousy; he looked at them as if he had caught them together, coupled as they were in this hot labour, striking exactly, by a common instinct, at the

right spot; both were covered with sweat, and seemed so heated, so dishevelled, that one would have said they were rather on the road to get a child than to thresh wheat. Perhaps Françoise who had abandoned herself so frankly to it, had the same feeling, for she stopped short in embarrassment. Buteau, turning round at that moment, stood for an instant motionless with anger and surprise.

"What have you got to do here, pray?"

But Lise came out just then, with Fouan and the Delhommes. She drew near them, and cried in her gay way:

"Why, it's true, I didn't tell you. I've seen him to-day already, and I invited him for this evening."

The husband's inflamed face grew so terrible that she added, as though she wished to excuse herself:

"I've a notion, Daddy Fouan, that he's something to ask you."

"Ask me what?" said the old man.

Jean blushed and stammered; he was fearfullly put out at the matter being broached so suddenly, before everybody. Buteau, moreover, interrupted him savagely, the laughing glance his wife had cast on Françoise had been enough to instruct him.

"Do you want to make bloody fools of us? She's meat for your betters, my whipper-snapper!"

The brutality of this greeting restored Jean's courage. He turned his back, addressed himself to the old man.

"This is the story, Daddy Fouan, it's plain enough. As you are Françoise's guardian, I must speak to you, to get her, mustn't I? If she cares for me: I care for her very much. It's if I can marry her, I'm asking."

Françoise, who had her flail still in her hand, let it drop now in astonishment. Yet she must have expected this; but she never thought Jean would dare to ask for her so openly, right off. Why had he not talked it over with her first? It troubled her; she could not have told whether it was hope or fear which made her tremble. And still quivering from her hard-work, with her

breast erect behind her disordered bodice, she stood between the two men, heated by such a tumult of blood through her veins that the contagion of it seemed to reach them.

Buteau left Fouan no time to reply. He interposed with growing fury:

"What! You've the cheek of the devil! An old chap of thirty-three is to marry a young girl of eighteen. It's only fifteen years difference. Isn't that enough to make you sick? . . . You must have a little lass, must you, to coddle your dirty hide!"

Jean began to lose his temper.

"What's it got to do with you, if I like her and she likes me?"

And he turned towards Françoise, so that she might pronounce between them. But the girl stayed stiff and frightened, without seeming to understand. She could not say no, yet she did not say yes. Buteau gave her a murderous glance, as though he would stifle the yes in her throat. If she married, he lost her; he lost the land as well. The sudden thought of this issue brought his passion to a head.

"Look here, father, and you Delhomme, look! Doesn't it disgust you that this young lass should mate with an old bugger who isn't even her own countryman, who comes from Lord knows where, after he's tramped all over the place? A joiner who couldn't get on, and turned peasant, because, of course, he had to sneak out of some dirty business."

All his hatred of the town artizan flared out.

"What then? If I like her and she likes me," said Jean, who was exercising his self-restraint, and who had promised himself, from a feeling of kindness, that he would leave her to tell their story first. "Come, Françoise, say something."

"And that's true," cried Lise, who was possessed by a desire to see her sister married, "what have you got to say, if they're agreed? She doesn't want your consent, she's very good not to send you marching at once. You'll end by being a nuisance."

Then Buteau saw that the affair was settled if the young girl

spoke. What he feared beyond everything was that if the intimacy was known the marriage would be looked upon as inevitable. Just then, La Grande entered the yard, followed by the Charles, who had returned with Élodie. And he summoned them with a gesture, without knowing what he would say. Then, he found something, his face was swollen with passion, and he bellowed out, threatening his wife and his sister-in-law with his fist:

" Bloody bitches! Yes, both of 'em, whores, bitches! Would you like to know? I have the two of 'em. That's why they think so bloody little of me. The two of 'em, I say, the whores! "

The Charles gaped, as this volley of language struck them full in the face. Madame Charles rushed forward, as if she would cover Élodie, who was listening, with her body; then, pushing her in front of her, towards the kitchen-garden, she cried at the top of her voice:

" Go and see the lettuces, go and see the cabbages. Oh, the lovely cabbages! "

Buteau went on, inventing details, explaining how when one of them had had her allowance, it was the other's turn to be rammed to the teeth; and he used crude terms, pouring out a flood of abominable words, that are not generally used. Lise, simply bewildered at this sudden frenzy, was content to shrug her shoulders, repeating:

" He's mad. Lord knows, it's not possible! He's mad! "

" Tell him he's a liar! " cried Jean to Françoise.

" Of course he's a liar! " said the young girl tranquilly.

" Oh, I'm a liar, am I? " went on Buteau. " And it isn't true that at harvest you wanted it against the rick? But it's me this time that's going to make you dance, strumpets, both of you! "

This insane impudence paralyzed and dumbfounded Jean. Could he explain now that he had had Françoise? It seemed to him a low trick, especially if she gave him no help. The

others, moreover, the Delhommes, Fouan, La Grande, maintained an attitude of reserve. They had not seemed to be surprised; they thought, evidently, that if the rascal slept with both of them, he was the master, might dispose of them as he liked. When one has rights, it is natural to insist on them.

Thenceforward Buteau felt victorious, he had the indisputable strength of possession. He turned to Jean:

"There, you bugger; I'd advise you to come again and pester me in my own house! Cut your bloody stick to begin with! What! you won't? Wait a bit."

He seized hold of his flail, swung round the beater, and Jean had barely time to catch up the other flail (Françoise's) to defend himself. People raised a shout, tried to separate them, but they looked so terrible that they had to fall back. The long handles could deal a blow some yards away; they swept the yard clear. The combatants alone remained in the middle, at some distance from each other, making a circle with their brandished weapons. Neither spoke a word: their teeth were set. Nothing was heard but the sharp crack of the pieces of wood at each thrust.

Buteau had struck the first blow, and Jean, who was stooping down, would have had his head broken if he had not made a bound backwards. Suddenly his muscles stiffened; he rose and brought down the flail as if he were a thresher beating the corn. But the other struck at the same time, and the dog-wood beaters met. They beat back on their tethers like wounded birds in their wild flight. Nothing could be seen but the sticks in the air. As they swung with a hissing noise at the ends of their handles, they seemed always on the point of falling and smashing in the skulls they threatened. Delhomme and Fouan, however, rushed in amid the cries of the women. Jean had just rolled over in the straw, struck treacherously by Buteau, who with a whip-like cut along the ground had touched his legs, although luckily the force of the blow was almost spent. He rose to his feet again, and he brandished his flail with a fury

to which his pain lent force. The beater described a large circle and fell on the right, when the other was expecting it on the left. A few inches more and the brains would have spattered the ground. As it was, it just grazed one ear. The blow slanted off and came right upon the arm, which was snapped clean through. The bone made a noise like the breaking of glass.

"Ah, the murderer!" howled Buteau, "he's killed me."

Jean, haggard, his eyes bloodshot, dropped his weapon. For an instant he looked at them all vacantly, as though he were bewildered by the rapid turn events had taken. Then he went off, limping, with a gesture of frantic despair.

As he turned round the corner of the house, making towards the plain, he met Slutty, who had been a witness of the fight over the garden hedge. She was still laughing at it. She had gone there to have a peep at the christening party, to which neither her father nor herself had been invited. How he would revel in it, Jesus Christ—the little family party, and his brother's broken arm. She writhed about as though someone was tickling her; she nearly tumbled over, it amused her so much.

"Oh, what a whack, Corporal!" she cried. The bone did make a noise! It was jolly!"

He made no answer: slackened his pace with an air of being overwhelmed. And she followed him, whistling to her geese, which she had brought with her in order to have an excuse for taking up her position and listening behind the wall. He went back mechanically to the steam thresher, which was still working in the waning light. He thought it was all spoilt, he would never see the Buteaus again; they would never give Françoise to him. What a piece of folly! Ten minutes had sufficed for it: a quarrel that he had not provoked, a stroke of ill-luck just as things were going right! And it was over—never again now! The buzzing murmur of the machine in the falling dusk was like a long, distressful wail.

But an encounter came about. Slutty's geese, which she was

driving home, ran exactly against the geese of Daddy Saucisse at a cross-road, as they were making their way by themselves down the village. The two ganders who were in front halted suddenly; they leant on one side with their big yellow beaks turned toward each other. And the beaks of each troop followed the beak of their leader, whilst their bodies swayed in the same direction. For a moment there was a compelte standstill, as though a regimental salute were taking place—two patrols exchanging pass-words. Then with a round and satisfied eye, one of the ganders went on straight forward; the other gander wheeled to the left, whilst each flock followed its leader, minding its own business, with the same waddling walk.

PART FOUR

CHAPTER I

Since the month of May, after the shearing and the sale of younglings, Soulas, the shepherd, had taken out the sheep from La Borderie. There were nearly four hundred head, which he tended alone, except for the help of the little swine-herd, Auguste, and his two dogs, Emperor and Murder—terrible animals. Until August, the herd pastured on the fallow land, the clover and lucerne, or even the waste land by the road side. It was barely three weeks now since, on the morrow of harvest, he had penned them in the stubble, beneath the last flaming suns of September.

It was the season of desolation: La Beauce was stripped and naked, displayed bare fields without a strip of vegetation. The heat of the summer, the absolute lack of water had parched the soil until it cracked. There was nothing left but a stain of dead grass, a hard prickly expanse of stubble, whose patches, prolonged as far as the eye could reach, made the wild and desolate waste of plain wider, as though a conflagration had swept it from end to end. A yellowish reflection seemed to be given by it to the line of soil, a weird light, a livid, stormy illumination. Everything looked yellow—a detestably sad yellow—the baked earth, the stumps of shorn stalks, the country roads, that were worn and battered in by wheels. At the smallest breath of wind, great dust clouds sprang up, covering slopes and hedges with their spray. And the blue sky, the blazing sun, were only one sad feature the more, in the desolate aspect of things.

To-day a strong wind was blowing in sudden, hot blasts, which brought along with them a gallop of big clouds; and when the sun came out it bit like red-hot irons, scorched the skin.

Since the morning, Soulas had been waiting for water to be brought from the farm, for himself and his flock; for the stubble where he was stationed was to the north of Rognes, far away from any pond. In the pen, surrounded by the movable hurdles, which were secured by cross-sticks stuck into the ground, the sheep were scattered about; their breath came in short and painful gasps; whilst the two dogs, stretched on their backs outside, were panting also, with their tongues hanging out. The shepherd, to get a little shade, had taken up his seat against the two-wheeled van, which he took with him whenever he shifted the pen—a tiny nook which provided him with bed and cupboard and larder. But at mid-day the sun beat down from directly overhead, and he stood up, looked into the distance to see if Auguste was not on his way back from the farm, where he had sent him to find out why the water-cask had not arrived.

At last the small swine-herd appeared, crying out:

"It's coming, they hadn't the horses this morning."

"Well, you silly bugger, and didn't you bring a bottle for us?"

"Eh, no! I never thought on't. I've had a drink."

Soulas clenched his fist, and aimed a blow which the urchin avoided with a jump. He swore; then he decided to eat, without drinking, in spite of his parching thirst. At his bidding, Auguste had distrustfully taken out of the van some bread that was a week old, some old nuts, and a dry cheese; and both of them fell to eating, watched keenly by the dogs, who every now and then snapped up a crust, which was so hard that it cracked between their teeth like a bone. In spite of his seventy years, the shepherd managed with his gums as readily as the small boy with his teeth. He still stood erect, as tough and knotty as a blackthorn stick, his face furrowed with fresh wrinkles, like the trunk of a tree, beneath the tangles of his faded hair, which was the same colour as the soil. And the swine-herd got his blow all the same, a knock which sent him flying into the van, just

as he was off his guard, and was putting back the remains of the bread and cheese.

"There, you bloody sod! Take that to drink, while you're waiting."

It was two o'clock, and there were no signs of anything coming. The heat had increased, grown intolerable, in the complete calm which had suddenly succeeded. Then, from the pulverized earth, the wind blew and raised fine clouds of dust on the spot, a sort of blinding, stifling smoke, which exasperated the tortures of thirst.

The shepherd, who had waited with a stoical patience, without a murmur, uttered at last a grunt of satisfaction.

"God's truth! it's none too soon."

Two carts, indeed, no bigger than a man's fist, had just appeared against the horizon of the plain; and in the first, which Jean was driving, Soulas had recognized at once the cask of water. The second, driven by Tron, was loaded with sacks of corn, which he was taking to a mill, whose tall wooden frame was visible from five hundred yards away. This last cart came to a halt on the road, Tron having accompanied the other to the sheep-pen, across the stubble, under the pretext of lending a hand—an excuse for resting and gossiping a little.

"Do they went to kill us all of the pip?" cried the shepherd.

And the sheep, who had also scented the barrel, rose tumultuously and crowded against the hurdles, sticking out their heads and bleating plaintively.

"Patience," answered Jean, "here's something you can get tight on."

The trough was rigged up at once, and they filled it by means of a wooden gutter; and, as there was a leak in this, the dogs came up and lapped it up to their hearts' content; whilst the shepherd and the small swine-herd, without waiting, drank greedily out of the gutter itself. The whole herd defiled; there was no other sound except the rushing of this grateful water,

and the gurgling of the thirsty throats; they were all delighted to splash in it, and drench themselves, men and beasts.

"Now you're here," said Soulas, cheering up at last, "if you wanted to be obliging, you might lend a hand to move the pen."

Jean and Tron agreed. The pen moved about over the vast extent of stubble; it never stayed more than two or three days in the same place, just long enough to allow the sheep to graze the coarse grass. And the advantage of this method was that, piece by piece, the land was manured. Whilst the shepherd, assisted by his dogs, kept the flock together, the two men and the little swine-herd pulled up the stakes and removed the hurdles fifty paces on. Then they fixed them up again in a huge square, into which the animals flocked for refuge of their own accord, before it was entirely shut in.

Soulas, in spite of his great age, was already pushing his van, moving it near the pen. Then, speaking of Jean, he asked:

"What's up with him, then? He might be burying God Almighty!"

And as the young man still hung his head gloomily—for he had been very low ever since he fancied that Françoise was lost to him—the old man added:

"Ay? I'll wager there's some female at the bottom of it. Ah! the darned varmints, they ought to have their necks wrung, the lot of 'em!"

Tron, with his giant limbs, his innocent, good-natured expression, began to laugh.

"That's what we say when we're worn out."

"I'm worn out—worn out, am I?" echoed the shepherd, contemptuously.

"I haven't tried it on with you, have I? And you know, my lad, there's somebody, it 'ud be a deal better for you if you were worn out, as far as she's concerned; for it'll end badly for sure!"

This allusion to his relations with Madame Jacqueline made

the farm hand blush to the roots of his ears. One morning, Soulas had surprised them together at the end of the barn, behind some sacks of oats. And in his hatred of this whilom scullery wench, so ill-disposed nowadays to her old companions, he had made up his mind at last to open the master's eyes. But, at his first word, the latter had given him such a terrible look that he had held his tongue. He was determined henceforth not to speak unless La Cognette should drive him to extremities by getting him dismissed. So that they lived on a war footing: he fearing that he would be cast adrift like some old and worn out animal, she waiting until she felt strong enough to demand this of Hourdequin, who clung to his shepherd. In all La Beauce there was not a shepherd who knew better how to pasture his flock without waste or loss, shearing a field from one end to the other, not leaving so much as a blade of grass.

The old man, seized by that itching desire to talk which sometimes unburdens the heart of solitary folk, went on:

"Ah, if my bitch of a wife hadn't drunk all my brass as fast as I earned it, before she died, it's me that would be away from the farm to keep from seeing all the dirty things that go on there! . . . This Cognette, there's one for you, whose belly has worked a sight harder than her hands. It's not her deserts, it's her body that's put her where she is! To think that the master lets her sleep in his dead wife's bed, and has come at last to take his meals alone with her, as though she were his wedded wife. We've only to wait, and the day'll come when she'll give us all the bloody chuck, and him too into the bargain. A drab who has been had by the lowest of the low."

Tron clenched his fists tighter at each sentence. He was subject to fits of fierce anger that his gigantic strength rendered terrible.

"There, that's enough, do you hear!" he cried. "If you were a man still I'd have smashed you in pieces already. There's more good in her little finger than in all your old carcase."

But Soulas shrugged his shoulders at the threat with a sneer.

He, who never laughed, gave a sudden rusty laugh now; it sounded like the squeaking of a pulley that is out of order.

"Get out, Mister Joker! You're a greenhorn! You're as big a fool as she is rogue. Oh, she'll show it you—under glass—her maidenhead. I tell you the whole country side has straddled her belly. I go my rounds you see, I've only got to look, and I see these girls getting blocked, even if I don't want to. As for her—the times I've seen her blocked—no! I've lost count! Look here! In the stable, when she was barely fourteen, by Daddy Mathias, a cripple, who's dead: then, later on, one day, by the kneading trough she was—kneaded by a youngster, William, the little swine-herd—he's a soldier now; and all the farm hands who've been there, and all the corners it's gone on in, on the straw, on the sacks, on the ground. Besides, there's no need to go back so far. If you want to hear about it, there's someone present; I saw him one morning in the hay-loft patching her up finely."

He indulged in a fresh laugh, and the side-glance he cast at Jean embarrassed the latter considerably. He had held his tongue and turned his back ever since they had begun to talk of Jacqueline.

"Let anybody try and touch her now," growled Tron, who was trembling with anger, like a dog whose bone has been meddled with, "and I'll give him something to satisfy him."

Soulas glanced at him a moment, amazed at this brutal jealousy. Then, falling back into the indifference of his long silences, he concluded briefly:

"That's your look out, my son."

When Tron had gone back to the waggon, which he was driving to the mill, Jean remained a few minutes longer with the shepherd to help him drive some of the stakes in deeper with a mallet; and the latter, seeing him so silent and gloomy, resumed once more:

"At any rate, it's not La Cognette that's given you the blues?"

The young man answered in the negative with an energetic shake of his head.

"Then it's some other woman? What other can it be, for me not to have seen you together?"

Jean looked at old Soulas; he said to himself that in these cases old men are often of good counsel. He, too, yielded to his need of unburdening himself; he related the whole story, how he had had Françoise, and why he despaired of recovering her, after his fight with Buteau. Temporarily, even, he had been afraid the latter would bring him to justice, on account of the broken arm, which prevented him from doing any work, although it was already half set. But Buteau, no doubt, had been of opinion that it is never wise to call down the attention of the law on one.

"You've blocked Françoise, then?" asked the shepherd.

"Once, yes."

He looked serious, reflected, finally announced:

"You must go and tell old Father Fouan. Maybe he'll give her you."

Jean looked surprised, for he had never thought of this plan, simple as it was. The pen was finished, he went off, having made up his mind to go and see the old man that very evening. And as he passed out of sight, Soulas resumed his eternal watch, behind the empty van; his thin, erect figure made a gray blot upon the flat line of the plain. The small swine-herd established himself between the two dogs in the shadow of the movable hut. The wind had suddenly dropped, the clouds had vanished in an easterly direction; and it grew very hot, the sun flamed in a pure, blue sky.

That evening, Jean left off work an hour before his usual time, and went to see old Father Fouan at the Delhommes, before dinner. As he descended the hill-side he caught sight of the latter in their vine-yard, where they were clearing the grapes, plucking the leaves off them. The end of last month had brought a copious rain-fall, the grapes were ripening badly, and they

had to take advantage of the last fine sunny days. The old man not being with them, Jean quickened his pace, in the hope of being able to speak with him alone, which he preferred. The Delhommes' house was at the other end of Rognes, beyond the bridge, a small farm-house, to which some barns and sheds had been added quite recently—three blocks, built irregularly, which shut in a fairly large court-yard, that was swept up every morning, and where the manure heaps were in such neat order that they might have been made with a measure.

"Good-day, Daddy Fouan!" cried Jean from the road, with a voice that failed him somewhat.

The old man was sitting in the yard, his head drooping, a stick between his legs. At a second call, however, he raised his eyes, finished by recognizing the speaker.

"Ah, it's you, Corporal! What brings you this way?"

He greeted him so naturally, without seeming to cherish any grudge against him, that the young man entered. But he did not dare to broach his business at once, his courage failed him at the thought of telling frankly the story of Françoise's fall with him. They discussed the fine weather, and the benefit it would be to the vines. If they had another week of sunshine, the vintage would be good. Then the young man tried to make himself agreeable.

"You're quite the gentleman; there's not a proprietor in the country so well off as you."

"Yes, to be sure."

"Yes, with children like you've got; you would go a long way to find their betters."

"Yes, yes. . . . Only, you know, everybody has his own ways."

His face grew darker. Since he had been living with the Delhommes, Buteau no longer paid his interest, saying that he didn't want his money to go into his sister's pockets. Jesus Christ had never paid a halfpenny, and Delhomme, now that he boarded and lodged his father-in-law, had ceased his payments. But it

was not the lack of pocket-money which afflicted the old man, especially as he drew from lawyer Baillehache a hundred and fifty francs a year—exactly twelve and a-half francs a month—which the sale of his house had produced. That enabled him to pay for his little luxuries, his pennyworth of tobacco each morning, his drop at Lengaigne's, his cup of coffee at Macqueron's—for Fanny, who was very close, never produced coffee and brandy from her cupboard unless somebody was ill. And in spite of all, although he had the wherewithal to amuse himself abroad, and his daughter let him want for nothing at home, he was discontented, and lived nowadays in a constant state of vexation.

"Lord, yes!" answered Jean, unconscious that he had put his hand on the sore spot, "one's never quite at home in somebody else's house."

"That's it; that's just it!" repeated Fouan, in a grumbling voice. And rising as though he were seized with a rebellious fit:

"We'll go and have a glass. I suppose I've the right to offer a glass to a friend."

On the threshold fear once more overcame him.

"Wipe your feet, Corporal! You see they make a pretty piece of work with their ideas of cleanliness."

Jean entered awkwardly, anxious to empty his heart before the people of the house returned. He was surprised at the extreme neatness of the kitchen: the pots and pans shone, there was not a speck of dust on the furniture, the floor was worn away from constant scrubbing. It was as clean and cold as though it were uninhabited. By the side of a dull fire of embers, some cabbage-soup from the day before was keeping warm.

"Here's your health!" said the old man, who had produced a half-full bottle and two glasses from the dresser.

His hand trembled slightly as he drank his glass, in his fear at what he was doing. He set it down with the air of a man who had risked everything; he added suddenly:

"Would you believe that Fanny hasn't spoken to me since

the day before yesterday because I spat? Yes, spat! Don't everybody spit? To be sure, I spit when I've a mind to. No, no, I'd sooner clear out of the bloody place than be bothered like that."

And, pouring out another glass, in his content at having a confidant to listen to his woes, he proceeded to unburden himself, not letting the other put in a word. They were only petty grievances, the anger of an old man whose failings were not tolerated, and whom they compelled to conform too rigidly to habits other than his own. But aggravated cruelty and real bad treatment would not have hurt him more. A reproof administered in too quick tones had the strength of a blow; and his daughter, withal, had an exaggerated susceptibility, the distrustful vanity of a worthy peasant-woman, and was hurt and turned sulky if her least word was badly received; so that the relations between her father and herself grew more strained daily. She, who of old, before the partition, was undoubtedly the best of them, had turned sour. It had got to the extent of an actual persecution; she was perpetually behind the old man, wiping up and sweeping after him, reprimanding him for what he did or what he left undone. It was nothing serious, and yet it was a torture, which sent him at last to shed solitary tears in some corner.

"One must put up with things," Jean echoed after each complaint. "With patience, it's always possible to agree."

But Fouan, who had just lit a candle, grew angry and excited.

"No, no, I've had enough of it. . . . Ah, if I'd known what I had to expect here! I'd better have died the day I sold my house. Only, they've made a mistake if they think they've got me fast. I'd liefer break stones on the road."

He choked with wrath, had to sit down, and the young man took advantage of it to speak at last.

"I say, Daddy Fouan, I wanted to see you because of that business. You know, I've been very sorry; I had to defend myself, hadn't I, when he attacked me? All the same, I was

quite agreed with Françoise, and there's no one but you now who can settle it. You might go to Buteau, and explain the thing to him."

The old man grew serious. He wagged his chin, seeming embarrassed as how to reply, when the entrance of the Delhommes saved him the trouble. They exhibited no surprise at finding Jean installed in their house, they gave him their accustomed friendly greeting. But, with her first glance, Fanny had observed the bottle and the two glasses on the table. She removed them, went and fetched a cloth. Then, without looking at him, she said harshly—she who had not addressed a word to him for forty-eight hours:

"Father, you know I don't like that."

Fouan got up trembling, furious at this remark before company.

"What, again? What, God's truth, ain't I free to offer a glass to a friend? Lock your wine up, I'll drink water."

In a moment, it was her turn to be profoundly annoyed at being publicly accused of avarice. She grew pale, and answered:

"You can drink the house dry and yourself to death, if it amuses you. What I don't like is that you should spoil my table with your glasses. When they're wet they make rings on it, as if we kept a tavern."

Tears rose in the father's eyes. He had the last word.

"A little less cleanliness and a little more heart would be better, my daughter."

And whilst she roughly wiped the table, he went and stood in front of the window, looked out at the black night which had fallen, shaken by a feeling of despair which he dissimulated.

Delhomme, without taking any side, had simply approved by his silence the firm and sensible attitude of his wife. He would not let Jean leave until he had had another drink, out of glasses which the wife served to them on plates. She excused herself, deliberately, in an undertone:

"You've no notion what trouble one has with old folk. They

are full of fads and bad habits, and they would as lief die as give 'em up. Him, you know, he's not bad, he hasn't the strength to be that. But all the same, I'd sooner have four cows to manage than one old man."

Jean and Delhomme gave an approving sign with their heads. But she was interrupted by the sudden entrance of Nénesse, who was got up like a town lad, in a fancy coat and trousers, bought ready-made of Lambordieu, and who wore a little hat of hard felt. He had a long neck, and a shaven chin, and he slouched in, looking like a girl, with his blue eyes, and his pretty, smooth face. He had always hated the soil, and he was going on the morrow to Châtres, where he had been engaged by a restaurateur who kept a dancing saloon. For a long time the parents had set their faces against this desertion of the farm; but at last the mother had been coaxed into consenting, and had brought round the father. Ever since the morning, Nénesse had been having a spree with his comrades in the village—a farewell spree.

For an instant he seemed annoyed at finding a stranger there. Then, making up his mind:

"I say, mother, I'm going to stand 'em a dinner at Macqueron's. I must have some coin."

Fanny looked at him fixedly, her mouth already open to refuse him. But she was so vain, that Jean's presence restrained her. As if their son couldn't spend twenty francs without their feeling it! And she disappeared, stiffly and silently.

"You've someone with you, haven't you?" the father asked Nénesse. He had caught sight of a shadow by the door. He went out, and recognizing the lad who had waited outside, he cried:

"Why, it's Delphin. Come in, my fine fellow!"

Delphin ventured in, bowing and apologizing. He had on a blue blouse and trousers, was shod in his big labourer's shoes, and he wore no tie; his skin was already tanned by his work in the hot sun.

"And you," went on Delhomme, who held him in great

esteem, "you are going off to Châtres one of these fine days?"

Delphin opened his eyes, then he said vehemently:

"Oh, s'help me, no! I should die in their towns."

The father cast a side glance at his son; whilst the other resumed, coming to his comrade's help:

"It's all right for Nénesse to go off there—when one wears fine clothes and plays the cornet."

Delhomme smiled, for his son's talent with the cornet made him swell with pride. Fanny, however, had returned with her hand full of two-franc pieces; and she counted out ten of them slowly into the hand of Nénesse: the coins were quite white from being buried under a heap of flour. She had no confidence in her cupboard, but always hid her money like this, in small amounts, in all the odd corners of the house, in the grain, the charcoal, the sand—so that, when she paid for anything, her money was sometimes one colour, sometimes another, white or black or yellow.

"It's just as good anyhow," said Nénesse for all thanks.

"Are you coming, Delphin?"

And the two lads departed; their laughter faded away into the distance.

After that Jean emptied his glass, as he saw old Fouan, who had not turned round during this scene, leave the window and go out into the yard. He took leave of them, and joined the old man, in the midst of the black night.

"See, Daddy Fouan, will you go to Buteau, so that I can have Françoise? You're the master; you've only got to speak."

The old man repeated in a voice that came abruptly out of the shadows:

"I *can't!* I can't!"

Then he burst out; he confessed. He had done with the Delhommes; he would go to-morrow and live with Buteau, who had offered to take him. If his son beat him, he would suffer less than by letting his daughter kill him with her pin pricks.

Exasperated at this fresh obstacle, Jean spoke out at last.

"I see I must tell you, Daddy Fouan. The fact is, we've been intimate, Françoise and I."

The old peasant gave a single exclamation:

"Ah!"

Then, after an interval of reflection:

"Is the girl with child?"

Jean, certain as he was that this was not so, since they had guarded against it, answered:

"It's quite possible."

"Then you've only got to wait. If she's in the family-way, we'll see."

At this moment Fanny appeared at the door, calling her father to come and have his soup. But he turned round, bellowed out:

"Shove your soup up your bloody arse! I'm going to sleep."

And he went up to bed, with an empty stomach, in his anger.

Jean made his way back to the farm at a laggard pace; he was so exercised by his grief that he found himself on the plain without remembering how he had got there. The night was darkly blue, the sky sown with stars, the air hot and heavy. In the quiet sky the approach and passage of some distant storm was once more perceptible; nothing was seen of it except some lightning reflections to the East. And when he raised his head, he saw on his left hundreds of phosphorescent eyes flaming like lighted candles; they revolved all around him at the noise of his steps. They came from the sheep in their pen, alongside of which he had to pass.

The drawling voice of old Soulas was heard.

"Well, laddie?"

The dogs, stretched on the ground, had not moved; they had scented a man who belonged to the farm. The small swineherd, driven out of the movable hut by the heat, was asleep in a furrow. And the shepherd alone was left standing erect in the midst of the cropped plain that was drowned in darkness.

"Well, laddie, have you done it?"

Without stopping, Jean answered:

"He said, if the girl got with child, they'd see."

Already he was at the end of the pen, when old Soulas' answer came to him. It sounded ominous in that tremendous silence.

"That's right; it's best to wait."

And he continued his walk. La Beauce, stretched out before him indefinitely, buried in a leaden slumber. One was sensible of its mute desolation; the burnt stubble, the parched and baked soil, in the scorching smell and the grasshoppers' song—they chirped like hot cinders amongst ashes. The shadowy outlines of the ricks alone relieved the bare, monotonous flat. Every twenty seconds, on the line of the horizon, the swift and melancholy lightning flashed a violet ray.

CHAPTER II

On the morrow Fouan went and took up his abode with the Buteaus. The removal was no trouble to anyone, there were two bundles of clothes, and these the old man carried round himself, making two journeys for the purpose. In vain the Delhommes tried to provoke an explanation. He departed without answering a word.

At the Buteaus' he was given the big room on the ground floor behind the kitchen, which hitherto had only been used for storing potatoes and mangel-wurzel for the cows. Its drawback was that the sky-light, which was placed at a height of six feet, gave it no more light than if it had been a cellar. And the worn mud floor and the heaps of vegetables and rubbish which accumulated in the corners caused a dampness which was perceptible in yellowish blots upon the bare plaster walls. For the rest it remained unaltered, only one corner of it was cleared, to allow room for an iron bed, a chair, and a white deal table. The old man appeared to be delighted.

Now was the time of Buteau's triumph. Ever since Fouan had been with the Delhommes he had lived in a passion of jealousy, for he was not ignorant of what was said in Rognes. To be sure it was a trifle to the Delhommes to support their father; as to the Buteaus, Lord! they hadn't the means. So in the early days he forced him to eat heartily, just to fatten him, as a way of proving that people did not die of starvation in his house. Then there was the income of a hundred and fifty francs, produced by the sale of the house; the father would be sure to leave this to whichever of his children had kept him. On the other hand, Delhomme, being relieved of his keep, would certainly resume paying his portion of the annual interest, two

hundred francs. And this he actually did. Buteau counted on those two hundred francs. He had calculated everything, told himself that he would gain the reputation of being a good son, without unbuttoning his pockets, and with a hope of being recompensed later—not to speak of the nest egg, the existence of which he always suspected, although he had never attained to certainty.

For Fouan it was a regular honeymoon. They feasted him, and exhibited him to the neighbours, as if they would say:

"Doesn't he look flourishing? Does *he* look as if he were at death's door?"

The children, Laure and Jules, were always hanging about him, occupying him, and winning his heart. But, above all, he was delighted to take up once more the fads that an old man cherishes, to be more at his ease in the greater liberty of that household. Although she was a good manager, and tidy, Lise had neither the refinements nor the sensitiveness of Fanny; and he could spit where he liked, go out and come in at his will, eat at any moment, as the peasant's habit is, who cannot pass a loaf of bread by without cutting off a slice, as his long hours of labour require. Three months passed like this; it was December, the biting cold had frozen the water in his ewer at the foot of his bed; but he did not complain; even when the thaw almost flooded the room, making the walls drip as though there had been a heavy shower, he found it only natural; he had spent his life under such rough conditions. So long as he had his tobacco, his coffee, and nobody bothered him, he said, he wouldn't change places with the king. The beginning of a change for the worse came one bright, sunny morning, when he returned to his room to find his pipe, after they thought he had gone out. Fouan found Buteau there in the act of tumbling Françoise on the potatoes. The girl, who resisted stoutly, picked herself up without a word, and left the room, having first selected the wurzels that she had come to fetch for her cows. And the old man, being left alone, faced his son angrily:

"You filthy blackguard, with that child, next door to your wife! And she was unwilling too. I saw how she wriggled."

"Why must you put your bloody nose in? Shut your peepers and hold your tongue, or it will be the worse for you."

Since Lise's confinement and the fight with Jean, Buteau had grown once more ravenous after Françoise. He waited till his broken arm was strong, then he fell upon her in every corner of the house, feeling sure that if he had her once she would be his as often as he wished. Was it not the best method to prevent the marriage, to keep the girl and the land too? These two passions of his had become one inseparable passion, his obstinate determination to stick to what he had, his savage possession of the field, and the unsatisfied lust of a male which was excited by resistance. His wife had grown enormous, a moving mountain, and she was giving suck, Laure was always hanging on to her nipples; whereas the other, the little sister-in-law, exhaled a pleasant odour of young flesh, her bosom was as firm and supple as a heifer's udders. However, he no more despised the one than the other, there should be two of them, one soft and one hard, each pleasant in her fashion. He was a good enough rooster for two hens; and he imaged a Pasha's easy life, which should be pampered and glutted with pleasure. Why shouldn't he have married both sisters if they had consented? It was an excellent way of confirming the bonds of kindness, and dispensing with that partition of the property which he dreaded, and which threatened him, as it were, with the loss of a limb.

And from that time, in the shed, in the kitchen, everywhere, as soon as they were alone together for a minute, there was the same scene, the sudden onslaught and defence, Buteau falling upon her, Françoise fighting against him. And it was always the same quick and infuriated interlude; as though she were an animal he was trying to mount; she, with clenched teeth and flashing black eyes, forced him to let go, struck him a tremendous blow right between the legs. Not a word was spoken, there

was only their hot breathing, a stifled sigh, the smothered noise of a struggle. He repressed a cry of pain; she arranged her dress and went off limping, with the lower part of her belly scratched and bruised, feeling as though the five fingers which had penetrated her at that spot were still there. And this took place even when Lise was in the next room, or even in the same room, if she had turned her back to lay some linen in a cupboard. It was as though his wife's presence excited him, and he could count upon the proud and stubborn silence of the young girl. Since Fouan, however, had seen them on the potatoes, there had been violent quarrels. He had gone and told the thing to Lise, crudely; and the latter, after abusing him for interfering in her concerns, had fallen out with her younger sister. So much the worse for her if she excited men. The same evening, however, she treated Buteau to such a scene that on the following morning she issued from their room with one eye half shut and blackened by a blow from his fist which had fallen there during the explanation. From that time forward there was no lull to their storms—one after the other was infected by them. There were always two ready to rend each other—husband and wife, or sister-in-law and husband, or sister and sister—when all three were not present and at loggerheads together. It was then that the stealthy, unconscious hatred of Lise and Françoise was aggravated. Their ancient fondness had turned to a bitterness which was without any apparent reason, but which possessed them from morning to night. At the bottom the sole cause was the man: this Buteau, who had fallen there like a destructive acid. Françoise, from the trouble which it caused her, would have succumbed long ago had not her will come to fight against the need she felt of yielding each time he touched her. She punished herself roundly, stubbornly set on her simple idea of justice—to give nothing that was hers, to take nothing that was another's; and she was angry because she felt jealous, and loathed her sister because this man was hers: this man by whose side she would have died of desire

sooner than have shared him. When he pursued her with his clothes disordered and his belly stuck out, she spat upon his male nakedness; she sent him back to his wife with this spittle; it was a relief to the desire she fought against, as though she had spat in her sister's face, in her dolorous contempt for the pleasure in which she had no portion. Lise, for her part, cherished no jealousy, convinced that Buteau had uttered a vaunting boast, when he declared that he used the two of them; not that she thought him incapable of such conduct, but she was sure that the child would never yield. And her only grudge against her was that this attitude of refusal turned the house into a perfect hell. The fatter she grew, the more she settled down in plump contentment, satisfied with life, gay with a sort of greedy egoism, attracting to herself all that was pleasant in her surroundings. Was it credible that people should squabble so, and make life wretched, when they had everything to make them happy! Oh, the wretched child! It was only her abominable temper which caused their disagreements.

Every night, as she got into bed, she declared to Buteau:

"She's my sister, but if she starts worrying me any more, I'll turn her out of the house."

He was not quite of that opinion.

"A pretty business that would be! We should have the whole country-side down on us. God's truth, you women! It's me that will give the two of you a bloody ducking in the pond, to make you agree."

Two more months elapsed, and Lise, who was bothered till she hardly knew what she did, might have sugared her coffee twice over, as she expressed it, and it wouldn't taste any better. The days when her sister had repulsed a fresh attack of her husband she could guess from a recurrence of bad temper, so that she lived now in a perpetual fear of these rebuffs to Buteau, was anxious when he slunk off stealthily behind Françoise's petticoats, and knew he would re-appear in a brutal state of mind, ready to smash everything and torture his household. Those were

abominable days, and she did not forgive the obstinate little wretch who would do nothing to smooth matters.

One day in particular was awful. Buteau had gone down with Françoise into the cellar to draw some cider. He returned in such a nasty temper, so furious, that for a mere trifle, for some soup that was too hot, he flung his plate against the wall, and then went out, knocking Lise down with a blow that would have felled an ox.

She picked herself up, weeping and bleeding, with a swollen cheek. And she fell upon her sister, crying:

"Drab! Let him have you then, and finish it. I've had enough of this; I shall run away myself, if you're so set on seeing me beaten."

Françoise listened in astonishment; she was very pale.

"As true as God hears me, I should prefer it! He'll leave us alone then, perhaps."

She had sunk back on her chair and was crying, giving little sobs. And all her fat, bursting person expressed her abandonment, her single idea to be happy even if it involved going shares. Since she would still have her share, it would cost her nothing. People had stupid ideas on the subject, for, of course, it was not as if it were bread, which is exhausted as soon as it is eaten. Why shouldn't they come to an understanding, be drawn together more closely for the sake of concord; live, in short, like a happy family?

"Come now; why won't you?"

In the depths of her revolt, Françoise could only cry out passionately in a strangled voice:

"You are more disgusting even than him!"

She went out in her turn to sob bitterly in the cow-shed, where she was watched by La Coliche with her big, troubled eyes. What made her so indignant was less the thing itself than her sister's *rôle* of complaisance, which tolerated an infidelity for the sake of the household calm. Had he been her own husband, she would never have given up a morsel of him, not so much

as that! Her bitterness against her sister turned to contempt; she swore that she would be skinned alive sooner than consent now.

But from this day forward the life got worse. Françoise became the drudge, the scape-goat, whom everybody abused. She was reduced to the condition of a servant—was borne down by heavy work, continually driven, scolded, and beaten. Lise would not suffer her to have an hour of leisure; she made her jump out of bed before daybreak, and kept her up so late at night that sometimes the poor thing fell asleep without having the strength to undress. Surreptitiously, Buteau tortured her with little familiarities, with slaps on the back, or pinches administered to her thighs, all kinds of fierce caresses, which left her bleeding, her eyes full of tears, but rigid in her silent obstinacy. He jeered at her, and was to some extent contented when he saw her totter as she suppressed the cry of her wounded flesh. Her body was all black and blue, striped with scratches and bruises. Before her sister, especially, she drew upon her courage, would not even wince, to confess how things were, as though it were untrue that this man's fingers searched her skin. However, she was not always mistress of her physical revolt, she replied sometimes with a blow struck at random; and then there were fights, Buteau beat her, and Lise, under pretext of trying to separate them, kicked them both impartially with her big, heavy sabots. Little Laure and her brother Jules howled frantically. All the dogs round about barked; it inspired the neighbours with pity. Poor child! She must have a stout heart to stay in such a den. It was, indeed, the great marvel of Rognes. Why did not Françoise run away? The sharper folk shook their heads:—She was not of age; she would not come of age for another eighteen months; and to run away was to put herself in the wrong, since she couldn't take her property with her. Lord! she was right to think twice about it. Perhaps, if her guardian, old Father Fouan, had backed her up! But he himself was not having a particularly good time with his son. The

fear of a row kept him quiet. And besides, the child had forbidden him to interfere in her behalf with the courage and untamed pride of a girl who would count only on herself. Henceforward, every quarrel ended with a chorus of the same insults.

"Get out of the bloody place, then! Get out of the bloody place!"

"Yes, that's what you hope. Once, I was foolish enough for that, I wanted to go. Now you can kill me, but I'll stay. I'm going to wait for my share, I want the land and the house, and I'll get them; yes, I'll get it all."

Buteau's great fear, for the first few months, was lest Jean should have got Françoise with child. Since he had surprised them in the rick, he counted the days, used to look at her askance, anxious about her shape. For the arrival of a child would have spoiled everything by making the marriage necessary. She was quite calm, knowing well that she could not be *enceinte*. But when she noticed the interest he took in her figure, she was amused by it, she tried deliberately to stick her stomach out, to make him believe that it was swelling. Now, whenever he caught hold of her, she felt him probing her there, measuring her with his big fingers. At last she said to him, with an air of defiance:

"That's right, there is one! It's growing."

One morning, she even folded some towels and tied them round her. That evening there was almost murder committed. And she was seized with terror at the murderous looks he gave her. Without a doubt, if she had had a child really in her womb, the brute would have given her some nasty blow to kill it. She left off these practical jokes, and grew slim again. Then she caught him in her bed-room, prying into her dirty linen, in order to assure himself of the thing.

"Make one, if you can!" he said to her with a sneer.

She answered, very pale and angry:

"If I don't, it's because I don't want one."

This was true; she refused herself to Jean with obstinacy. Buteau was none the less insolent in his triumph. And he fell upon her lover; a fine male, wish you joy of him! suppose he's rotten, since he can't make a child! He could break a man's arm by treachery; but he was actually incapable of filling a girl, he had so little sinew. After that he pestered Françoise with allusions, amused even herself sometimes with his jokes about her kettle and its leaky bottom.

When Jean heard how Buteau regarded him, he talked of breaking his jaw; and he was always looking out for Françoise and imploring her to yield. They would soon see if he couldn't put a child in her, and a fine one, too. His desire now was aggravated by anger. But each time she found a fresh excuse, the idea of beginning again with the young man seemed so unattractive. She did not dislike him, she was simply without any wish for him; and she must indeed have had hardly any desire for him, or she would have yielded and abandoned herself, when she fell into his arms, behind a hedge, still flushed and furious from some attack of Buteau. Oh, the blackguard! She spoke of nothing except "that blackguard!" in her passionate resentment; but she grew cold at once if the other wished to take advantage of it and have her. No, no! it would make her ashamed! One day, when he pushed her to extremities, she put it off to a later time, to the night of their marriage. It was the first time that she had made any engagement; hitherto she had avoided giving him a definite answer when he asked her to be his wife. After that it was an understood thing: he would marry her, but after she was of age, as soon as she was mistress of her property, and could demand an account. He was struck with the excellence of this reason; he preached patience to her, and ceased to trouble her, except at certain moments, when his desire to laugh at it was too strong for him. Then, relieved and calmed by the vagueness of this distant postponement, she was content to seize his two hands and prevent him, looking at him with her pretty imploring eyes, with the air

of a sensitive woman, who does not choose to risk having a child by anyone except her husband.

Buteau, however, being certain that she was not with child, was seized with another fear—that she might become so, if she went with Jean again. He continued to distrust him; and trembled, for he heard everywhere how the latter had sworn that he would line Françoise up to her eyes, as a girl had never been lined before. So he watched her from morning to night, demanding an account of the employment of every minute, keeping her tethered, threatened with the whip, as though she were some household animal, whose pranks had to be guarded against. And this was a torture the more she felt that her brother-in-law or her sister were always behind her petticoats, she could not go to the dung-hole for a purpose, without meeting a spying eye. At night she was locked in to her room; one evening, after a quarrel, she even found a padlock on the shutter of her sky-light. Then, as she contrived all the same to escape them, there were abominable scenes at her return, cross-examinations, sometimes an inspection, the husband holding her arms whilst Lise half undressed her in order to see. She was reproached by Jean, until she came to give him rendezvous, delighted at braving the others. Perhaps she would have given in to him at last, if they had been there, behind her. In any case she engaged herself definitely, swearing to him by all she held most sacred that Buteau lied when he boasted of sleeping with both the sisters, that he wanted to be cock of the roost, and bring about a condition which did not exist. Jean, tormented by a doubt, for at bottom he found the thing possible and natural, appeared to believe her. And when they took leave of each other, they kissed, and were very good friends; so much so, that from this time, she made him her confidant and adviser, endeavouring to see him at the least alarm, and venturing on nothing without his approval. He no longer laid a finger on her, but treated her as a comrade whose interests were identical with his own.

Every time now that Françoise ran to join Jean behind some

wall, the conversation was the same. She angrily unfastened her bodice, or pulled up her petticoat.

"See, that blackguard has hurt me again!"

He ascertained how it was, and said coldly and resolutely:

"He will pay for it; you must show it to the neighbours. . . . Above all, don't revenge yourself. Justice will be on our side, when we have the right to act."

"And my sister would hold the candle, you know! Do you know that yesterday, when he attacked me, she crept off instead of throwing a pail of cold water over him."

"Your sister will come to a bad end with the bugger. . . . Very good! It's certain that if you won't, he can't; and as for the rest, what does it matter to us? Let's be agreed, and he's done for."

Daddy Fouan, while he refrained from meddling, was none the less brought into every quarrel. If he held his tongue they forced him to take a side; if he went out, he returned only to find the household in disorder, and his mere presence quite sufficient to kindle the flame of anger again. Hitherto he had not suffered materially. Now, however, privations began for him; his bread was doled out, his little luxuries suppressed. They no longer crammed him with food, as in the early days; every slice he cut too thick brought him hard words. What a maw! The less one worked the more one stuffed, then! He was watched and robbed every three months when he returned from Cloyes after drawing the interest which M. Baillehache paid him on the three thousand francs from the house. Françoise had to steal sous from her sister to buy him tobacco, for she too was kept without money; and, finally, the old man was very badly off in the damp room where he slept since the day when he had broken a pane in the skylight, which they had stopped up with straw to save the expense of putting in fresh glass. Ah! these wretched children, they were all alike! He grumbled from morning to night; he was mortally sorry that he had ever left the Delhommes, in despair at having gone from bad to worse. But

this regret he concealed, or revealed only in involuntary words, for he was aware how Fanny had said: "Papa will come and beg us to take him back on his bended knees." It was finished—that remained always like an impregnable barrier across his heart. He would sooner die of hunger and wrath with the Buteaus than go back and humiliate himself to the Delhommes.

It happened one day, when Fouan was returning on foot from Cloyes, after having received his interest from the lawyer, and had sat down by the side of a ditch, that Jesus Christ, who was roaming round with an eye to the rabbit warrens, caught sight of him profoundly engrossed and counting five-franc pieces into his handkerchief. He stooped down immediately, crept up and got above his father without making a noise. And lying so at full length, he was astonished to see him tie up carefully quite a large sum, perhaps as much as eighty francs. His eyes kindled, his wolf-like teeth were exposed in a silent laugh. At once the old idea of a nest-egg returned to him. Evidently the old man had some bonds hidden away, and took advantage of his visit to M. Baillehache every three months to cash the coupons. Jesus Christ's first thought was to burst into tears and obtain twenty francs. Then that seemed to him paltry; his mind began to develop a larger scheme. He went off as quietly as he had come, with the stealthiness of a snake; so that Fouan, once more on the road, had not the smallest suspicion when he ran across him a hundred paces further on, looking, with his gay, disinterested air, as if he, too, were on his way back to Rognes. They went the rest of the way together, chatting: the father fell instinctively upon the Buteaus; heartless people they were; he accused them of starving him to death. And the son, with moist eyes, proposed good-naturedly to save him from such scum by taking him in his turn. Why not? *They* didn't bother folk; in his house they made merry from morning to night. Slutty cooked for two, she could do it for three. And a damned fine cook she was when there was money in the house. Astonished at the offer, and seized with a vague inquietude, Fouan refused.

No, no! he was too old to shift about from one to the other and change his habits every year.

"Anyhow, father, it's an honest offer; think it over. . . . There! you know there's always a roof for you. Come to the Castle when you've had enough of those sods."

And Jesus Christ left him, puzzled and perplexed, asking himself on what the old man spent his money, since undoubtedly he had some. Four times a year a heap of five-franc pieces like that? It couldn't be less than three hundred francs. If he didn't spend them, it was because he saved them. He must see to that. It would be a famous nest egg!

Upon that day, a stale and damp day in November, when Daddy Fouan came in, Buteau was waiting to clear him of the thirty-seven francs fifty which he drew every three months since the sale of the house. It was agreed, moreover, that the old man gave them up to him, as well as the two hundred francs a year from Delhomme. But on this occasion, one five-franc piece had been put away by mistake with those he had tied up in his handkerchief; and when he searched his pockets and could only find thirty-two francs fifty his son fell in a rage. He called him a rogue, and accused him of squandering the five francs on drink and abominations. Dumbfounded, with one hand on his handkerchief, in blank terror, lest it should be searched, the father stammered out an explanation, swore by all his gods that he must have lost them when he blew his nose. Once more the house was at loggerheads until the evening. What put Buteau in a ferocious mood was a glimpse he had caught, as he came back with his harrow, of Jean and Françoise stealing behind a wall. She had gone out under the pretext of cutting some grass for the cows and had not re-appeared; for she suspected the scene which awaited her. The night fell already, and Buteau went out every minute, ragingly, to the court-yard, and as far as the road, to see if the baggage was not coming back from her man. He swore at the top of his voice, and used filthy language, without seeing his father, Fouan,

who had seated himself on the stone bench after the quarrel, and was growing calmer as he breathed in the warm mellow air, which made this sunny November like a month of spring.

A sound of sabots was heard coming up the incline, and Françoise appeared, bent double, her shoulders laden with an enormous bundle of grass, that she had secured in an old cloth. She panted and sweated, half concealed by her load.

"S'help me, you drab," cried Buteau, "if you think you're going to do as you bloody well like, and take two hours grinding with your man when there's work to do here."

And he threw her down on the bundle of grass, which had fallen; he rushed at her, at the very moment that Lise, in her turn, came out of the house to bellow at her:

"Now, you Jenny-shit-in-your-sleep, just come here, and let me kick your backside for you! Haven't you any shame?"

But Buteau had already caught hold of the girl beneath her petticoat, with a brutal hand. His rage always ended like this in a sudden rush of lust. Whilst he trussed her on the grass, he growled in a choked voice, his face purple and inflamed with blood.

"Damned bitch! it's my turn to have a look in now. Strike me blind! but I'll go where the other one's been."

Then a mad struggle began. Old Father Fouan could barely make it out in the darkness. But he saw Lise, however, who stood there and looked on, acquiescent, whilst her man wallowing and thrown from side to side every moment, spent himself in vain, and satisfied himself with what pleasure he could get, no matter where.

When it was over, Françoise gave a last shake and freed herself; then she cried in hoarse, gasping tones:

"Blackguard! blackguard! blackguard! . . . you couldn't, it doesn't count. I laugh at you for it! you shall never do it, never!"

She was triumphant, she took a wisp of grass while a shudder went through her whole frame, as if she were pleased herself

somewhat at the obstinacy of her resistance. With a gesture of bravado, she flung the wisp of grass at her sister's feet.

"There, it belongs to you! It's not your fault that I'm able to give it you."

Lise shut her mouth with a blow, just as the old man, Fouan, who had left his stone bench in disgust, intervened, brandishing his stick.

"Dirty buggers, both of you! Will you leave her alone? I say there's been enough of this."

Lights began to show in the neighbours' houses; the row was making people uneasy, and Buteau hastened to drive his father and the young girl into the kitchen, where there was one candle burning, and where Jules and Laure had sought refuge in a corner, terrified. Lise entered also: she had seemed struck silly and dumb since the old man had issued from the shadow. He went on, addressing her:

"As for you, it's too disgusting and too foolish. You were looking on; I saw you."

Buteau brought his fist down with all his might upon the table.

"Silence! it's finished. I'll strike the first one who says any more."

"And if I have some more to say—I?" asked Fouan, in a trembling voice. "Will you strike me?"

"You as soon as anyone! You are a nuisance."

Françoise put herself between them courageously.

"I implore you, uncle, not to meddle. You've seen that I'm a big enough girl to defend myself."

But the old man pushed her off.

"Be quiet; it's nothing to do with you. It's my business."

And raising his stick:

"So you'd strike me, you scoundrel! You'd better see whether I'm not going to correct you."

With a prompt hand Buteau seized the stick from him, and

flung it beneath the cupboard. And with a sneer, and a nasty look in his eyes, he came in front of him and spoke into his face:

"Will you bloody well leave me alone? If you think I'll put up with your airs—no, no! Just look at me, and see what my name is."

Face to face, they both were silent for a moment, fiercely endeavouring each to make the other quail before his glance. The son, since the partition of the property, had filled out, was set squarely on his legs, and his jaw was more prominent in the mastiff's head, with the narrow, retreating forehead; whilst the father, annihilated by his sixty years of labour, withered still more, his back bent double, retained in his shrunken face nothing but the huge nose.

"What your name is!" repeated Fouan. "I know it too well; it's I that got you."

Buteau jeered.

"Then you shouldn't have got me. But that's how it is, you see. There's a turn for everyone. I've your blood in me, I don't like being worried. So, once more, leave me blasted well alone, or it'll finish badly!"

"I'm sure it will—for you. I never spoke like that to my father."

"Oh, come now, that's rather stiff! Your father, you'd have killed him if he hadn't died."

"It's a lie, you dirty blackguard! And God strike me dead, if I don't make you swallow it at once."

A second time Françoise endeavoured to interfere. Lise, herself, made an effort, she was so frightened and upset at this new disturbance. But the two men thrust her aside, to draw closer together, and blow defiance at each other in each breath. It was blood against blood, a conflict of brutal authority, handed down from father to son.

Fouan would have increased in stature, seeking to recover his former omnipotence as the head of the family. For half a

century he had made them tremble before him, wife, and children, and herds, while he still withheld fortune and power from them.

"Own that it's a lie, own that it's a lie, you dirty blackguard! Else as sure as this candle's alight I'll make you sing."

He threatened him with his uplifted hand, with the same gesture with which he had brought them to their knees of old.

"Own that it's a lie!"

Buteau, who in his youth, when he scented a blow, winced and cowered behind his elbow, with chattering teeth, was content now to shrug his shoulders with an air of insulting mockery.

"Do you suppose I'm afraid of you? . . . They were all right when you were master, antics like that."

"I am the master—the father."

"Get along, old fool, you're nothing at all. There! will you hold your bloody jaw now!"

And seeing the trembling hand of the old man come down as if to strike, he seized it, as it fell, crushed it in his rough fist.

"You're damned obstinate, I suppose I must lose my temper before I can drive it into your thick head that we don't care a snap for you now. . . . Are you good for anything? You're an expense, that's all! When people have lived their time and handed on their land to the others, they'd better chew their quid in quiet, and not give 'em any more bother."

He shook his father, to accentuate his words; then, with a last jolt, flung him off trembling and stumbling. He fell back on to a chair by the window. And there the old man stayed choking for a minute; he was conquered and humiliated at knowing that his old authority was dead. It was finished; he had ceased to be of any consequence, since he had stripped himself of his possessions.

A great silence intervened; they all stood with their hands hanging down. The children had not breathed for fear of a blow. Then work was resumed as though nothing had occurred.

"And the grass?" asked Lise, "is it to be left in the yard?"

"I will go and put it to dry," Françoise replied.

When she came in again, and they had dined, Buteau, incorrigible, stuck his hand down the opening in her bodice, to look for a flea, which was biting her, she said. She was not angry this time; she even met it with a joke.

"No, no, it's somewhere where it would bite you."

Fouan had not stirred; was dumb and stiff in his dark corner. Two big tears rolled down his cheeks. He recalled the evening when he had broken with the Delhommes; a repetition of that evening ensued now—there was the same shame at being no longer master, the same anger which made him obstinately refuse his food. They called to him three times, but he would not accept his share of the soup. Suddenly, he rose and vanished into his room. The next morning, at day-break, he left the Buteaus and established himself at Jesus Christ's.

CHAPTER III

JESUS CHRIST was full of wind; its constant blasts pervaded the house and filled him with delight. Faith, no! nobody was dull at this beggar's house, for he never let a single one without making a joke by way of accompaniment. He would have none of those bashful noises stifled at their birth, which sounded awkward and embarrassed. He only went in for honest explosions as frank and free as cannon reports, and every time he lifted his leg with a movement of swaggering relief, he looked grave, and called his daughter in an impressive voice of command:

"God's truth, Slutty, come here."

She ran up; there was a report, it shot into space; it vibrated so that she positively jumped.

"Run after it. Get your teeth on it to see if it has any knots!"

At other times when she came he held out his hand to her:

"Pull away, then! Make it crack!"

And as soon as the explosion came, with the force and thunder of a mine that had been blasted too liberally, he would say:

"Oh, it's hard! Thanks, all the same!"

Or, again, he would lift an imaginary gun, take a careful aim, then, the arm having been discharged:

"Go and fetch it: find it, quick, you lazy thing!"

Slutty choked and tumbled over, she laughed so much. The joke was being continually repeated, and it excited more merriment each time. However well she knew the game, or however ready she might be for the thunderous conclusion, he none the less overcame her by the comical vivacity of his turbulence. Oh, that dad, what a jest he was! Sometimes he talked of a tenant who wouldn't pay his rent, and whom he had to kick out; sometimes he turned round and bowed gravely as though the table

had said good-day; at others he produced quite a number of them—one for his reverence the parson, one for his honour the mayor, another for the ladies. It almost seemed as though the dog could do what he liked with his inside—it was a regular musical box: so much so, that at the *Good Husbandman* at Cloyes people used to bet, "I'll stand you a drink if you can make six," and he let six; he won every time. It became quite a boast; Slutty was proud of it, and began to writhe with laughter as soon as he lifted his thigh; she was in constant admiration of him, through the mingled terror and affection with which he inspired her. And on the evening of Daddy Fouan's installation at the "Castle," as they called the former vault, where the poacher burrowed, with their first meal—the daughter served her father and grand-father, standing behind them respectfully like a servant—the merriment rang out loudly. The old man had given her five francs; a fine smell filled the place, of broad beans and veal and onion stew, which the girl had cooked; it was enough to make your mouth water. As she put on the beans, she nearly broke the plate in her amusement. Jesus Christ, before taking his seat, let three regular, sharp ones.

"The signal for the feast! That shows it's begun!"

Then, reflecting for a moment, he let a fourth—huge, and solitary, and insulting.

"For those swine, the Buteaus! Let 'em stop their jaws with it!"

In a moment, Fouan, who had been moody since his arrival, laughed. He approved with a motion of his head. It put him at his ease; they spoke of him, too, as having been a joker in his day; and in his house, too, the children had grown up tranquilly, in the midst of the paternal bombardment. He put his elbows on the table, and was gradually invaded by a sense of comfort, in front of this great rascal, Jesus Christ, who was watching him, with moist eyes, and his good-natured scamp's expression.

"S'help me, dad! if we don't make things go smooth for

you. You'll see if I've not the dodge; I'll undertake to keep your spirits up. If you could get to live on earth like the moles, what good will it do you to refuse yourself a tit-bit? "

Shaken in the sobriety of his whole life, feeling a need to get out of himself, Fouan ended by admitting:

" To be sure! far better to squander everything than to leave anything for others. . . . Your health, my lad! "

Slutty served the veal and onions. There was silence, and Jesus Christ, not to let the conversation cease, let a prolonged one, which escaped through the straw bottom of his chair with a humming intonation like a human voice. In a moment he turned to his daughter with a look of serious interrogation:

" What was that you said? "

She said nothing; she had to sit down and hold her sides. The climax of it was after the veal and cheese, the final expansion of father and son, who had started smoking and were emptying the bottle of brandy that had been placed on the table. They did not talk any more, their mouths were occupied; and they were getting very drunk.

Slowly Jesus Christ lifted his buttock and thundered; then he glanced at the door, crying out:

" Come in! "

Fouan, in a fit of emulation, tired at last of not being in the game, called back his youth, lifted his rump and thundered in his turn; then he answered:

" Here I am! "

Both struck their hands together, their faces touching as they talked and laughed. It was a merry time. And it was too much for Slutty, who had dropped on to the floor and was being shaken by convulsive laughter, so much so that in one of her fits she, too, let one off, that was soft, and low, and musical as a note on the fife in comparison with the organ-sounds of the two men.

Indignant and revolted, Jesus Christ rose, extending his arm with a gesture of tragical command:

" Be off, you sow! Be off, you stink-pot! God's truth, I'll

teach you to respect your father and your grand-father! " He had never tolerated such familiarity. One must be old to do that. And he waved the air aside with his hand, pretending that the little flute-like note had suffocated him. His own, he said, only smelt of gunpowder. Then as the culprit, who was quite scarlet and overcome at her oversight, denied it and struggled to remain, he threw her out with a shove.

" You dirty, beastly cow! shake your clothes! You shan't come in for an hour, till you've aired yourself."

From that date a life of real carelessness and merriment began. The old man was given the girl's room, a compartment in the old cellar, which had been shut off by a blank partition; and she withdrew, complacently, further in, where there was an excavation in the rock, which formed a sort of back apartment, and from which, tradition declared, long subterraneous passages issued, which a land-slip had blocked up. The drawback was that the Castle, that foxes' burrow, was buried deeper every winter, with the heavy rains, which beat upon the steep declivity of the hill and rolled the stones down; nothing would have been left of the ramshackle place, neither its old foundations nor its reconstructed parts in rough stones, had not the secular lime-trees, planted above it, kept the whole structure together with their huge roots. But as soon as spring came, it was an exquisitely cool corner, a grotto buried beneath a thicket of briar and hawthorn bushes. The wild-rose bush which hid the window was starred with pink blossom; the very door was draped in honey-suckle; and to effect an entrance you had to push it aside with your hand, as though it were a curtain.

To be sure, it was not every evening that Slutty had scarlet runners and veal and onions to cook. That only happened when the grand-father had been mulcted of a silver coin, and Jesus Christ, not from any particular discretion, did not abuse him, managed rather to strip him by playing on his gluttony and his affections. They kept high holiday during the early days of the month, as soon as he had drawn his sixteen francs, the pension

from the Delhommes; then, they made merry until everything was broken, every three months, when the lawyer paid him his interest, thirty-seven francs and a half. At first he would only dole out fifty centime pieces, wanting to make it last, set obstinately in his old avarice. But little by little he put himself in the hands of his great vagabond of a son, tickled and lulled by his marvellous stories, shaken by his tears sometimes, until he produced two or three francs, and even fell into an extravagant fit himself, saying it was better to spend it all with a good will, since, sooner or later, it would be spent. There was this to be said, moreover, in justice to Jesus Christ: he went shares with the old man; at least he kept him amused, even if he robbed him. At the outset, affected through his stomach, he shut his eyes in the matter of the nest-egg, and made no effort to find it out. His father was free to amuse himself after his own fashion, one couldn't ask any more of him than to do what he did—pay for their festivities. And he only began to meditate on the money he had caught sight of, which was hidden somewhere or other, about the second fortnight of the month when the old man's pockets were empty. There was not a farthing to be got out of him. He grumbled at Slutty, when she gave them potatoe-pie without any butter; he drew his belt tighter and mused on the folly of pinching oneself to hoard halfpence, and thought that one fine day that nest-egg would have to be hunted up and spent.

None the less, after their evenings of want, when he stretched out his ox-like frame, he bore up against the depression of things, grew as noisy and jovial as though he had dined well, and brought back their gaiety with a salute of heavy artillery.

"Instead of turnips, those, Slutty! and butter. S'help me!"

Fouan was not dull even during those painful last days of the month; for the father and daughter both took the field then, to fill the pot; and the old man was led away and ended by being of the party. The first time he saw Slutty return with a fowl which she had caught with a line, from the other side

of a wall, he had been angry. Then she had made him laugh so the second time—one morning when she had hidden herself up a tree and hung down, in the middle of a flock of ducks who were passing, a hook baited with meat. Suddenly a duck jumped at it, gulped down everything, meat and hook and string; and it disappeared in the air, drawn up sharply, stifled without a quack. It was a little indelicate, to be sure, but creatures which live out of doors, well, they ought to belong to whoever can catch them, and as long as you don't steal money, Lord! you're honest folk! After that, he grew greatly interested in the hussy's marauding feats, her incredible adventures—a sack of potatoes that the lawful owner had helped her to carry, cows that she had milked into a bottle while they were grazing, even linen from the washerwomen, that she sunk with stones to the bottom of the Aigre, and went back and plunged in at night to recover it. All along the roads she was always to be seen; her geese gave her a perpetual pretext to tramp the country-side and watch for her opportunity from the side of a ditch for whole hours with the sleepy air of a goose-girl minding her flock; for she made use of her birds as if they were dogs; the gander hissed to warn her if any intruder threatened a surprise. She was eighteen at this time, and she was no bigger than she had been at twelve, still as supple and slim as a poplar shoot, with her head like a young goat's, her green cross-eyes, her big mouth that had a twist to the left. Beneath her father's old blouses, her little childish breasts had become firm without growing larger. She was a regular boy, who cared for nothing but her birds, and was quite indifferent to men, although this did not prevent her finishing a rough and tumble game with some urchin on her back as a matter of course, because she was made so, and it led to no consequences. She had been lucky enough to have restricted her favours to young rascals of her own age; it would have been altogether a nastier business if grown men, her elders, had not left her alone, finding her flesh unattractive. In fine, as her grandfather said, amused and won over by her, except

that she was too fond of thieving, and was somewhat lacking in modesty, she was a good girl enough all the same, and not so rough as one would have expected.

But Fouan's especial distraction was to follow Jesus Christ in his lazy excursions across the fields. Beneath every peasant, however honest he may be, there lurks the poacher. It all interested him, the snares he set, the night-lines he laid, the devices of his wild life, his strategic warfare, his perpetual conflict with the keeper and the police. As soon as their braided hats and yellow shoulder-straps emerged from some road and passed along the corn-fields, father and son stretched themselves on a slope and appeared to be asleep. Then suddenly the son would creep on all-fours along the ditch to remove his gear, whilst the father, looking an innocent and worthy old man enough, continued watching the shoulder-straps and the vanishing hats. There were some magnificent trout in the Aigre, which they sold to a fishmonger at Chateaudun for forty or fifty sous; the worst of it was, one had to watch for them for hours, lying on one's belly on the grass, they were so cunning. Often they went as far as the Loire, whose muddy bottom was the home of excellent eels. When Jesus Christ got nothing from his lines, he had invented a convenient form of fishing, which consisted in robbing, during the night, the fish supplies of the dwellers on the river banks. That was only for a joke, however; with him sport was a fevered passion. His ravages extended over several leagues; and he despised nothing, quails in default of partridges, starlings in default of larks. He rarely made use of a gun; its report in a low-lying country reaches too far. No covey of partridges ever rose out of the lucerne and clover without his knowing it; he was even acquainted with the place and the time when the young birds, stupid with sleep and wet with dew, could be caught with the hand. He had improved kinds of bird-lime for the larks and quails; he sent showers of stones after the clustering clouds of starlings which the winds of autumn brought. During the twenty years in which he had been devastating the game of the

district, there was not a rabbit to be found in the thickets on the hillocks by the Aigre; the sportsmen were furious at it. The hares alone escaped him; indeed these were rare, and had a way of coursing across the open plain, where it was dangerous to follow them. Oh, those few hares on La Borderie! He dreamt of them, risked prison in bringing one down from time to time with a gun-shot. Fouan did not accompany him if he saw him take down his gun. It was too foolish, he would inevitably end by getting caught. Presently the thing happened naturally. It must be said that Farmer Hourdequin, exasperated at the destruction of the game on his estate, had given the strictest orders to Bécu; and the latter, annoyed at never dropping upon anybody, slept in a rick one night to see. One morning, then, just at daybreak, a gun-shot, the flame from which passed close to his face, awoke him with a start. It was Jesus Christ; he had aimed from behind the heap of straw, and had shot a hare forthwith.

"'Struth, it's you, is it?" cried the game-keeper, catching up the gun which the other had leant against the rick, while he picked up the hare. "Ah, you swab, I ought to have suspected it."

At the wine-shop they slept together in their cups; but in the fields they could not meet without danger; one was always on the point of catching the other, the latter determined in such a case to smash the other's jaw.

"Well, what if it's me. I don't care a damn for you! Give me back my gun."

Bécu was already dismayed at his catch. Ordinarily he went deliberately to the right, when he caught sight of Jesus Christ on the left. What was the good of having a nasty shindy with a friend? But this time his duty was plain; it was impossible to shut his eyes. Besides, people might be polite at any rate, when they are in the wrong.

"Your gun, you blackguard! I shall keep it; I'll take it to the mayor's, and if you move or are up to any dodge, I'll fire the other barrel into your guts."

Jesus Christ, furious but disarmed, shrunk from leaping at his throat. Then, when he saw him move off towards the village, he started to follow him, still keeping his hare, which he swung in his hand. They both went for a mile like this, not speaking a word, but exchanging fierce glances. Every minute a struggle seemed imminent, and, nevertheless, the uneasiness of each grew stronger. What an unfortunate encounter!

As they reached the back of the church, not two paces from the Castle, the poacher made a last effort.

"Look here, don't be a fool, old man! . . . Come and have a glass in the house."

"No, I must draw up the information," replied the gamekeeper, stiffly.

And he held out obstinately, with the air of an old soldier who only recognises the pass-word. However, he came to a halt. He ended by saying, as the other caught hold of his arm to drag him along: "If you've got some ink and a pen, it'll be much the same. In your house or another's, it's bloody much the same to me, so long as I draw up the paper."

When Bécu arrived at Jesus Christ's house the sun had risen. Daddy Fouan was already smoking his pipe at the door. He understood what had happened, and felt anxious: all the more so as the matter retained its serious aspect. Ink and an old rusty pen were produced, and the keeper began to hunt for sentences, looking terribly contentious, with his elbows spread out. But at the same time Slutty, at a word from her father, brought out a bottle and three glasses, and after the fifth line Bécu, who was exhausted and had lost himself in the complicated recital of his facts, accepted a bumper. After that, little by little, the situation improved. A second bottle was broached, then a third. Two hours later the three men were talking excitedly and amicably, with their faces touching. They were very drunk; they had completely forgotten the business of the morning.

"You're a damned cuckold," shouted Jesus Christ, "you know that I go to bed with your wife."

It was the truth. Ever since the fête he had tumbled La Bécu in corners, treating her without any delicacy, like a bit of worn-out flesh. But Bécu, who got nasty in his cups, took offence. If he tolerated the thing when he was sober, it wounded him when he was drunk. He brandished an empty bottle, bellowing:

"Damn you, for a blackguard!"

The bottle broke against the wall, it just missed Jesus Christ, who sat gaping with a bland, sodden smile. To soothe the cuckold, it was agreed that he should stay with them, and help eat the hare then and there. When Slutty jugged anything, an excellent smell was borne from one end of Rognes to the other. It was a fine revel, and lasted all day. They were still at table, sucking the bones, when night fell. They lit two candles and resumed. Fouan found three one-franc pieces and sent the girl to buy a pint of brandy. The country-side had gone to bed, and they still sat sipping it. And Jesus Christ, whose hand was perpetually groping for a light, dropped upon the interrupted indictment which had been left on the corner of the table and was stained with wine and gravy.

"True enough, that must be finished," he mumbled, his sides shaken with a drunken laugh. He contemplated the paper, meditating a joke, some device by which he might express all his contempt for writing and the law. Suddenly he lifted his thigh, and slipping the paper underneath, he let one on the top of it, strong and loud, one of those which he said were loaded to the muzzle.

"That's signed now!"

All, including Bécu, joined in the merriment. Ah! no, nobody felt bored in the Castle that night.

It was about this period that Jesus Christ made a friend. Plunging one night into a ditch, to let the police go by, he found a fellow established there before him, who had very little desire to be seen; and they fell into conversation. He was a good sort, Leroi, nicknamed Canon, a journeyman carpenter,

who had deserted Paris two years previously on account of some trouble, and who preferred to live in the country, tramping from village to village, doing a week here, a week there, and offering his services from one farm to another when his employer did not want him. Now there was a scarcity of work, he begged on the high-roads, lived on the vegetables and fruits he stole, happy enough when he was allowed to sleep under a rick. Frankly, he was not made to inspire confidence; he was ragged, very dirty, very ugly, marked with the ravages of poverty and vice, his face so white and thin, with its border of sparsely growing beard, that the mere sight of him was enough to make the women shut the door against him. Worse still were the abominable harangues he indulged in; he talked of cutting the throats of the rich, and feasting one fine day until one burst out of one's skin on other men's women and wine. He uttered these threats in a sombre voice, clenching his fists;—revolutionary doctrines picked up in the suburbs of Paris, talk of social restitutions that poured from him in fiery phrases, a torrent which bewildered and alarmed the rustics. For two years the farm folk had seen him arrive like this at the close of day to ask for a corner of the straw to sleep on. He took a seat near the fire and froze their blood with the terrible sentiments he uttered. Then the next day he would vanish again, only to reappear a week later at the same sad hour of dusk with the same prophecies of death and destruction. And this was why, after a time, he was driven away from everywhere, the image of this uncanny creature tramping the country left behind it such a feeling of terror and of wrath.

Jesus Christ and Canon had taken to each other at once.

"S'help me!" cried the former, "what a mistake I made in not cutting all their throats in '48 at Cloyes! Come along, old man, we must have a glass together."

He took him back to the Castle that night and let him sleep with him; he was seized with greater respect the more the other talked; he found him his superior, a man who knew much, and

was full of ideas for the sudden reconstruction of society. Two days later Canon departed. Again he returned after a fortnight, and started off once more at daybreak. And thenceforth, from time to time, he turned up at the Castle, ate and snored as if he had been at home, and swore at each one of his visitations that the *bourgeois* would be wiped out before three months had passed. One night when the father was out poaching, he tried to outrage the daughter; but Slutty, indignant and scarlet with shame, bit and scratched him to such effect that he had to let her go. For what did the old beast take her, then? He must think her green!

Fouan, also, had small love for Canon, whom he accused of being a loafer, and of holding opinions which would bring him to the scaffold. When the rogue was there, the old man became so gloomy that he preferred to go out and smoke his pipe out of doors. In other ways than this, however, his life was again growing difficult; he no longer joined his son's drinking bouts so readily since an unpleasantness had come between them. Hitherto, Jesus Christ had only sold his share of the land, piece by piece to his brother, Buteau, and his brother-in-law, Delhomme; and on each occasion, Fouan, whose signature was necessary, had given it without remark, once being assured that the property remained in the family. But at present there was a question about the last field, on which the poacher had borrowed money, a field which the mortgagee threatened to sell by auction, as he had never received a sou of the agreed interest. M. Baillehache, on being consulted, said that he must sell it himself, and at once, if he did not want to be ruined with costs. The unfortunate part of it was that both Delhomme and Buteau refused to buy, in their anger at the way their father let that great vagabond, his eldest son, prey upon him; they were resolute not to meddle in the matter so long as he lived there. And the field was to be sold by order of the Court, there was a huge amount of stamped-paper being used over it; it was the first piece of land to pass out of the family. The old man could

not sleep for thinking of it. This land, that his father, his grand-father had coveted so hotly, and acquired so painfully! Land that he had possessed and kept so jealously, as it were the wife of his bosom! To see it crumble away like this in the hands of the law, decrease in value, and pass into the possession of another, of a neighbour, for half what it was worth. It made him tremble with rage; it broke his heart; he sobbed over it like a child. Oh, that blackguard, Jesus Christ!

There were terrible scenes between the father and son. The latter did not answer; he let the other wear himself out with reproaches and lamentations, standing erect and tragical, raving of his sufferings.

"Yes, you're a murderer; it's just as if you were to take a knife, do you hear? and slice off a piece of my flesh. . . . Such a fine field; you can't find a finer—a field where everything grows, if you don't do more than breathe on it! What a lazy skulker you must be, not to have your jaw broken sooner than give it up to another! . . . My God! My God! To another! That's what I think of; that's what makes my blood boil! Have you no blood in your body then, you drunken bugger? . . . And it's all because you've drunk it; yes, drunk the land, you damned swilling whore-monger! Blackguard! Pig!"

Then, when the father choked and dropped down exhausted, the son answered placidly:

"Now, ain't it folly, dad, to torment yourself like that? Pitch into me, if it's any relief to you; but I don't think you're at all reasonable, that I don't. . . . Look here, now; we can't eat it, the land. If they served it up on a plate, you would make a wry face enough. I've borrowed money on it, because that's my own particular way of making it raise five-franc pieces. And then it'll be sold, just as my namesake, Jesus Christ, was sold; and if it brings us in a few crowns, well, we'll drink them; . . . that's the real, sensible way to look at it. Good Lord! we shall die quite soon enough, and have the soil to ourselves."

But, where father and son were at one was in their hatred of the bailiff, Master Vimeux, a little, shabby-looking bailiff, who was given the disagreeable work that his colleague at Cloyes did not care about, and who ventured one evening to call at the Castle with a judgment order. Vimeux was a little bit of a man, excessively dirty, a vision of yellow beard, out of which sprang a red nose and two blear eyes. Always dressed like a cit, in a hat, a frock coat, and black trousers, that were filthy with stains and long use, he was famous throughout the district for the fearful drubbings he got from the peasants, whenever he was compelled to serve a writ on them, out of reach of succour. There were stories current of all the switches that had punished his shoulders, the compulsory baths he had taken in horse-ponds; once he had run for two miles with a prong after him; once a mother and daughter had taken down his breeches and whipped him.

As it chanced, Jesus Christ had just come in with his gun; and Daddy Fouan, smoking his pipe on the trunk of a tree, said to him with a growl of anger:

"This is the disgrace you bring on us, good-for-nothing!"

"Wait and see!" muttered the poacher, setting his teeth.

But as soon as he saw the gun, Vimeux stopped short, thirty paces off. All his miserable person, black and filthy, in spite of his correctness, trembled with fear.

"Monsieur Jesus Christ," he said in a small, thin voice, "I've come about that business, you know. . . . I'll leave it here. I wish you good evening!"

He placed the sheet of stamped paper on a stone, already he was retreating backwards quickly, when the other shouted:

"Damned ink-squirt, must I teach you manners? . . . Are you going to bring me that paper?"

And as the wretched man, motionless and terrified, dared neither advance nor retreat by so much as a foot-step, he covered him with his gun.

"I'll put a bullet in you, if you don't hurry up. . . . Come,

pick up your paper, and come along—nearer, nearer—no, much nearer, you bloody sneak, or I'll fire! "

Frozen and ashy white with fear, the bailiff tottered on his short legs. He cast an imploring look at Daddy Fouan. But the latter went on placidly smoking his pipe, full of savage rancour against the expense of the law, and the man who, to the peasant's view, is its incarnation.

" Ah, so we're here at last; that's lucky. Give me the paper! No, not with the ends of your fingers, as if you were ashamed of it. God's truth, be mannerly, and look pleased about it. . . . Now, that's nice of you."

Vimeux, paralyzed by the sneers of this big rascal, waited, blinking his eyes, at his joking threats, in expectation of the fisticuff or the box on the ears which he felt was coming.

" Now, turn round! "

He understood and did not budge, drew in his buttocks.

" Turn round, or I'll do it for you! "

He saw that there was nothing to do but submit. He was a pitiable sight as he wheeled round, and presented his wretched little rump like a skinny cat's. The other, forthwith, took aim, and drove his foot to the very spot, with such effect that he sent him flying on to his face, four paces off. And the bailiff, picking himself up painfully, started off at a mad gallop with this cry in his ears:

" Look out! I'm going to shoot! "

Jesus Christ brought his gun up to his shoulder. Only, he contented himself with lifting his thigh, and bang! he let one of such a sounding kind, that terrified at the report, Vimeux spurted off again. This time his black hat tumbled on to the stones. He followed it, picked it up, ran harder. Behind him the reports continued, bang! bang! bang! without cessation, a regular battery, to an accompaniment of terrific laughter, which gave the last touch to his state of stupefaction. He tore down the hill like a grasshopper, and was a hundred paces off, and the echoes of the valleys were still resounding with Jesus Christ's

fusilade. The whole country side was full of it, and he let a last formidable one, just as the bailiff, looking in the distance about the size of an ant, disappeared into Rognes. Slutty, who had run up at the noise, was holding her sides on the ground, clucking like a hen. Daddy Fouan had withdrawn the pipe from his mouth in order to give vent to his laughter. God's truth, that Jesus Christ! He was no great shakes, but mighty amusing all the same!

The week after that, however, the old man had to make up his mind to give his signature for the sale of the land. M. Baillehache had found a purchaser, and the wisest course was to follow his advice. It was decided then that the father and son should go to Cloyes on the third Saturday in September, which was the eve of St. Lubin's Day, one of the two holidays in the town. It happened that the father had to draw at the tax collector's the interest, due since July, on the bonds which he had hidden away, and he counted on taking advantage of this expedition and losing his son in the bustle of the *fête*. They were to go and return alike on Shanks' mare.

As Fouan and Jesus Christ waited outside Cloyes until a train had passed, standing in front of the shut gate of the level-crossing, they were joined by Buteau and Lise, who drove up in their cart. A quarrel broke out at once between the two brothers. They hurled insulting epithets at each other until the gate was opened, and Buteau, even (having reached the other side) as he let his horse go down the hill, turned round, his blouse swollen out by the wind, to shout out some more unmentionable remarks.

"Be off, you lout; I'm keeping your father!" roared Jesus Christ, with all his might, making a speaking-tube out of his two hands.

In the Rue Grouaise, at M. Baillehache's, Fouan passed a painful time; all the more so, since the office was crowded, everybody taking advantage of market-day to come there, and he had to wait nearly two hours. It reminded him of the Saturday when he had come there to settle the division. Well, it would

have been better if that Saturday he had gone and hung himself. When the lawyer at last could see them, and he had to sign, the old man looked for his spectacles, and wiped them; but his eyes were full of scalding tears, his hand shook, so that they were obliged to guide his fingers on the paper to the right spot before he could write his name, which he did with a great blot. It cost him such an effort, that he was sweating, stupefied and shivering, and glancing round him, as though he had undergone an operation, had lost a leg and was trying to find it. M. Baillehache lectured Jesus Christ severely; and he sent them off with a homily on the law; a resignation of one's property was immoral; in the long run, the duties attendant upon it would certainly be raised so as to prevent people from preferring it to succession by inheritance.

When they were outside, in the Rue Grouaise, by the door of the *Good Husbandman*, Fouan deserted Jesus Christ, in the midst of the bustle of the market. The latter, moreover, lent himself to the scheme, laughing in his sleeve, with a shrewd suspicion of what business was in hand. In effect, the old man made directly for the Rue Beaudonnière, where M. Hardy, the tax-collector, inhabited a cheerful little house, between a courtyard and a garden. He was a stout, florid, jovial man, with a beard, dyed a deep black; the peasants were greatly in awe of him, and accused him of bewildering them with his long words. He received them in a narrow office, an apartment divided in two by a railing; he sat one side of it, they were on the other. Often, there were a dozen of them there, all standing up, pressed and crowded together. At this time there chanced to be nobody there but Buteau, who had just arrived.

Buteau could never bring himself to pay his taxes right away. When he received the schedule in March it threw him into a vile temper for a week. He damned with impartial fury the land tax, the income and property tax, the door and window rates, but his worst anger was directed against the extra centimes which, he declared, increased year by year. Then he waited

until he received a summons, which cost nothing. That was always a gain of one week. Then he paid, in twelve instalments, one each month, on his way to market; and every month the same torture ensued, it made him ill the night before; he brought his money there, as he might have taken his head to the executioner. Oh, that bloody government! It existed merely to rob you!

"What! it's you?" said M. Hardy jovially. "You do well to come; I was going to run you in for some costs."

"It only wants that," growled Buteau. "And you know, I'm not going to pay the six francs you've added to the land-tax. It isn't right."

The tax collector started laughing.

"I know! every month you sing the same tune. I've explained to you before, that your returns must have increased with your plantations in your old field by the Aigre. That's what we must base our figures on."

But Buteau disputed it fiercely. A pretty idea that his returns were bigger. It was like his meadow, it used to be seventy acres and now was only sixty-eight; the river had shifted its bed and devoured two of them. Well, he still had to pay for seventy! Where was the justice of that? M. Hardy answered placidly that questions of assessment did not concern him; he must wait until there was a new assessment. And under the pretext of renewing his explanations, he overwhelmed him with figures and technical words, none of which the other understood. Then, with his jovial air, he concluded:

"After all, don't pay, it's nothing to do with me! I shall send in a broker."

Buteau was frightened and taken aback; he repressed his rage. When one is not the stronger party, one can only submit; and his inherited hatred was augmented through his fear,—his hatred of that obscure and complicated power which he felt above him, the government, the law, "those do-nothings, the masters," as he called them. Gingerly he brought out his purse.

His big fingers trembled; he had taken a great quantity of copper at market, and he felt each halfpenny before he placed it in front of him. Three times he checked the amount; it was all in copper, and that was more heart-rending,—to have to pay out such a great pile. At last, with troubled eyes, he watched the collector put the money away; and just then Daddy Fouan appeared. The old man had not recognised his son's back, and he seemed thunderstruck when the latter turned round.

"Are you very well, Monsieur Hardy?" he stammered. "I was passing, so I took it into my head to look in and wish you good-day. I hardly ever see you now."

Buteau was not taken in. He made his bow and went off, as though he were in a great hurry; and five minutes later he returned, with the pretext of asking some question which he had forgotten, at the very moment when the collector had cashed the coupons, and was counting out to the old man his three months' interest, seventy francs in five-franc pieces. His eyes gleamed, but he avoided looking at his father, and pretended not to see him throw his handkerchief over the coins and then fish them up as though it were a sweep-net and drop them to the bottom of his pocket. This time they went out together, Fouan, in great perplexity, stealing side glances at his son; Buteau, in a splendid humour, seized with a fit of sudden affection. He would not leave him, wanted to take him back in his cart; and he went with him as far as the *Good Husbandman*.

Jesus Christ was there with little Sabot, a wine-grower from Brinqueville, another renowned wag, who also could make wind in quantities sufficient to keep a mill going. Both of them meeting there then, they had just made a bet of ten pints, to go to the one who could put out most candles. Friends, in great excitement, and convulsed with rough laughter, had accompanied them into the inner room. A circle was made; one performed on the left, the other on the right. With their breeches down, they took aim with their backsides; and at every shot each man extinguished his candle. Sabot was at his tenth, however, while

Jesus Christ was at the ninth, he having on one occasion been out of wind. He was extremely annoyed at this, his reputation was at stake. Buck up! is Rognes to let itself be beaten by Brinqueville? And he puffed as never bellows of a forge had puffed: nine, ten, eleven, twelve! The crier of Cloyes, who was lighting the candles, was very nearly blown away himself. Sabot had reached ten with difficulty and was drained and empty, when Jesus Christ let two more, calling to the town-crier to light them, those two as a wind-up. The town-crier lit them, they burnt yellow, with a rich yellow flame, like gold; it rose like a sun in its glory.

"God's truth, that Jesus Christ! What guts! He took the cake!"

The friends shouted, and laughed, till their jaws ached. There was admiration and jealousy mingled; for all said and done, a man must be built strong to hold so much, and be able to let it out when he pleased. They drank the ten pints, it lasted two hours, during which they talked of nothing else.

Buteau, himself, had given his brother a friendly smack on the buttocks as he was doing up his breeches; and peace seemed to have been made, after this victory, so gratifying to the family. Daddy Fouan, feeling quite rejuvenated, related a story of his childhood, of the days when the Cossacks were in Beauce: yes, a Cossack had fallen asleep, with his mouth wide open, by the side of the Aigre, and he, Fouan, had let one down his throat, one that must have gone right through him. The market closed; they all departed, very drunk.

The next thing was that Buteau drove back Fouan and Jesus Christ in his trap. Lise too, her man having whispered something in her ear, made herself pleasant. They no longer wrangled, they petted their father. But the elder son, as he grew sober, made some reflections. Why was his younger brother so kind; could the bugger have run the secret to earth, at the tax-collectors? Wait a minute, though! If the rascal had even had the grace to respect the nest-egg so far, he would

never be fool enough to let him go back with anyone else. He would look after that, quietly, without losing his temper over it, since the family had had a reconciliation. When they reached Rognes, and the old man wanted to get out, the two scamps hastened forward, vying with one another in their respectful solicitude.

"Lean on me, father!"

"Give me your hand, father!"

They received him, and deposited him on the road. And between the two of them he stood in stupefaction; he was pierced to the heart by certainty, he had no more doubt now.

"What's the matter with you both, pray, that you're so fond of me?"

Their consideration terrified him. He would have preferred them in their usual condition, without any respect for him. What bloody luck! He was in for no end of bother, now they knew he had some brass! He returned to the Castle in despair.

As it happened, Canon, who had not been seen for two months, was sitting there, on a stone, waiting for Jesus Christ. As soon as he caught sight of him, he shouted:

"I say, your daughter is in the wood by Pouillard, with a man."

In a moment the father was ready to expire with indignation; the blood rushed to his face:

"I'll teach the bitch to disgrace me."

And, taking down a big waggoner's whip from behind the door, he ran along the rocky declivity to the little wood. But Slutty's geese watched over her like faithful dogs, when she was on her back. In a moment the gander scented the father's approach and stepped out, followed by the flock. With its wings spread, its neck stretched out, it hissed out a hard and continual menace, whilst the geese drawn up in battle array, stuck out their necks likewise, with their big, yellow beaks open and ready to bite. The whip cracked, and there was a noise like an animal

escaping under the leaves. Slutty had been warned and taken flight.

Jesus Christ, as he hung up his whip again, seemed to be overcome with a fine philosophic melancholy. Perhaps the incorrigible shamelessness of his daughter gave him a sense of pity for humanity's passions. Perhaps it was simply a reaction after his glory, his triumph at Cloyes. He shook his wild head, which resembled that of a drunken and outcast Christ, and said to Canon:

"Come! If you'd like to know—the whole thing's not worth a fart."

And, lifting his thigh over the valley that was buried in the shadow, he let one, full of vast contempt, as though he would overwhelm the earth with it.

CHAPTER IV

It was in the early days of October. The vintage was about to begin—a great week for tippling, when estranged families ordinarily effected a reconciliation round the pots of new wine. Rognes had been pervaded with grapes for the last week; so many were eaten that the women pulled up their clothes and the men took down their breeches under every hedge. Lovers, with purple stains on their mouths, exchanged loud kisses amongst the vines. The end of it was: drunken men, and girls got with child.

On the morrow of their return from Cloyes, Jesus Christ had started searching for the nest-egg, for the old man would not carry about his person the money and the bonds—he must hide them in some corner. But in spite of the help Slutty gave her father, they turned the whole house over without discovering anything for all their cunning and the keen scent they had acquired in marauding. And it was not till a week later that the poacher, in taking down an old cracked pot that was no longer in use from a shelf, chanced to find under some lentils a packet of papers carefully laid up in the oilskin lining of a hat. Besides that, not a penny-piece! No doubt the money was hidden somewhere else, and a famous store it must be, since the father had spent nothing for the last five years. There were the bonds right enough; an income of three hundred francs in the five-per-cents. As Jesus Christ counted them over and examined them, he unearthed another paper, a stamped document covered with big writing, the reading of which dumbfounded him. God's truth! That's where the money went!

It was maddening story! A fortnight after he had divided his property at the lawyer's, Fouan had fallen ill. It was such a weight on his mind not to possess anything of his own, not

so much corn as would fill his hand. No! he could not live like that; it would have worried him into his grave. And it was then that he had committed the folly—an absolute folly, like that of some old incorrigible, who gives his last halfpenny to return in secret to the worthless woman who deceives him. He, who had been cunning enough in his time, had let himself be trapped by a friend, old Father Saucisse! It must have been very hot on him, that furious lust of possession, which they have in their bones like a madness, all those old males who have worn themselves out in fertilizing the soil, it was so hot on him that he had signed an agreement with Daddy Saucisse, under which the latter, on his death, was to leave him an acre of land, on the condition that he should be paid fifteen sous every morning during his lifetime. A precious bargain, when you are seventy-six, and the seller is ten years younger! The truth was that the latter had been rogue enough to take to his bed just at the time: he coughed, and was giving up the ghost, to such good purpose that the other, rendered stupid by his desire, thought himself the more cunning of the two, and hastened to conclude so excellent an affair. No matter, it only proved that when you are burning for a girl or a field, it's a better plan to take to your bed than to sign anything. For it had lasted five years, he had paid the fifteen sous every morning; and the more he paid, the more ardently he was set upon the land, the more he wanted it. To think that he had freed himself from all the miseries of his long, laborious life, that he might die in peace, watching the others devoting their flesh to the ungrateful soil, and that he had gone back to let it finish him off! Ah, well, there's not much wisdom in men, whether they are old or young!

For a moment Jésus Christ thought of seizing everything, the agreement as well as the bonds. But his heart failed him; he would have to bolt after a move like that. It was not as if it was money, that one could appropriate, and wait till there was more of it. And he replaced the papers angrily under the lentils at the bottom of the pot. His exasperation was so extreme that

he could not hold his tongue. By the following day, Rognes was acquainted with the story of Daddy Saucisse, the fifteen sous a day for an acre of inferior land which was certainly not worth three thousand francs.

In five years that came to nearly fourteen hundred francs already, and if the old scamp lived another five years, he would have his field and the price of it as well. They chaffed Daddy Fouan. Only, people who had not glanced at him as he passed along the road, ever since he had only his old carcass to take out in the sun, once more bowed to him respectfully, now he was known to be a man of means and a land-owner.

The family, more especially, seemed to have changed their attitude. Fanny, who had been very cool with her father, wounded at his withdrawal to the house of that scamp, his eldest, instead of again taking up his abode with her—Fanny brought him linen, some old shirts of Delhomme's. But he was very distant, alluded to her saying, which still made him sore: "Papa will come and ask us to take him back on his knees;" and he greeted her with: "So it's you that have come to see me, on your knees!" When she returned home, she shed tears of shame and wrath; her susceptibility, as a proud peasant-woman, was vulnerable to a glance. Honest and industrious and well-off as she was, she ended by quarrelling with the whole country side. Delhomme had to promise that, for the future, he himself would remit the money due to their father; for, as far as she was concerned, she vowed that she would never speak a word to him again.

As for Buteau, he astonished them all one day that he came to the Castle—just to pay the old man a visit, as he said. Jesus Christ, with a jeer, produced a bottle of brandy, and they drank each other's health. But his merriment turned to stupefaction, when he saw his brother pull out ten five-franc pieces and place them in a row on the table, saying:

"Father, you know we must square up. There's your last quarter's money."

God's truth what a beggar! he, who hadn't given the father a halfpenny for years. Had he come to curry favour with him by showing the colour of his money? However, he suddenly pushed away the old man's arm which was thrust out, and gathered up the coins.

"Wait a bit! It was to let you know I've got them. I'll keep them for you; you'll know where to come and get them."

Jesus Christ opened his eyes; he was getting wroth.

"Look here! If you want to get dad away——"

But Buteau took the thing as a joke.

"What, are you jealous? And suppose I had the dad one week and you had him the next? Wouldn't that be natural enough? How would it be if we cut you in two, father? . . . Here's your health, anyhow!"

Before he left, he asked them to come the next day and help pick the grapes in his vine-yard. They could cram themselves with grapes, as many as their bellies could hold. In fine, he was so gracious that both agreed that, big blackguard as he was, he was good fun enough so long as one didn't let him meddle with one's affairs. They went with him to the end of the road for the pleasure of his company. Just there, at the bottom of the hill, they ran across Monsieur and Madame Charles, who were returning with Élodie to their house, White Roses, from a walk beside the Aigre. All three were in mourning for Madame Estelle, as they called the child's mother. She had died in the month of July—died of anxiety, for every time the grandmother returned from Châtres she had declared that her poor daughter was killing herself with the trouble she took to maintain the high reputation of the establishment in the Rue aux Juifs, about which that loafer, her husband, cared less and less. And what a shock the funeral had been for M. Charles! He had not ventured to take Élodie to it, nor brought himself to break the news to her until her mother had been sleeping three days in the earth. What a strain on his heart that morning when, after so many years, he saw once more No. 19, at the corner

of the Rue de la Planche-aux-Carpes—No. 19, with its yellow façade, its green shutters that were always kept closed, the work of his whole life, to-day draped in black, the little door open, the passage blocked by the coffin, which stood between four wax candles.

What touched him, was the way in which the neighbours shared in his grief. The ceremony really went off well. As they brought out the coffin from the passage, and it appeared on the pavement, all the women of the neighbourhood crossed themselves. They started for the church amid a general hush. The five women of the establishment were present, dressed in black; looking all that they ought—such was the description of them current that evening in Châtres. One of them even shed tears at the cemetery. From that quarter, at any rate, M. Charles reaped nothing but satisfaction. But on the following day, when he questioned his son-in-law, Hector Vaucogne, and visited the house, how he suffered! It had already lost its lustre; you felt that the hand of a man was lacking, when you noticed all sorts of liberties allowed, which he would never have tolerated in his time. He realised, however, with gratification that the excellent behaviour of the five women at the funeral had made them known in the town to such advantage that for a week the establishment was never empty. As he left No. 19, his head tormented with anxiety, he did not conceal from Hector that now poor Estelle was no longer there to take the helm, it was for him to turn over a new leaf and attend to business seriously, unless he meant to devour his daughter's fortune.

Buteau immediately begged them, too, to come to the grape-picking. But they refused on account of their mourning. They had melancholy faces and slow movements. All they accepted was an invitation to come and taste the new wine.

"And that's only to distract this poor child," declared Madame Charles. "She has so little amusement here, since we've taken her away from school! What's to be done, however? She can't learn lessons for ever."

Élodie listened with lowered eyes, her cheeks flooded, for no apparent reason, with crimson. She had grown very tall, very slim, and was as pale as a lily which has grown up in the shade.

" Well, what are you going to do with a great girl like that? " asked Buteau.

Élodie blushed deeper, whilst her grand-mother replied:

" Dear me! we hardly know. . . . She will think things over; we shall leave her quite free."

But Fouan, who had taken M. Charles aside, asked him with an interested air:

" And how's business? "

He shrugged his shoulders with an expression of despondency.

" Ah, that's where it is! I've just seen someone from Châtres this morning. It's owing to that we are in such trouble. . . . The house is done for. People fight in the passages; they don't even pay, there's such poor superintendence."

He folded his arms, and took a long breath to relieve himself of what was chiefly oppressing him, a new grievance whose enormity he had not digested since the morning.

" And, would you believe it? the wretched man goes to the café now! The café, the café! When one has a nice home! "

" The bugger's done for, then! " put in Jesus Christ, with an air of conviction. He had been listening.

They became silent, for Madame Charles and Élodie were coming up with Buteau. At present all three were talking of the dead woman. The young girl was saying how sad it had made her not to have been able to kiss her poor mamma for the last time. She added, with her air of simplicity:

" And it seems the end was so sudden; and they were so very busy in the confectionery. . . ."

" Yes, for some christenings," Madame Charles hastened to add, winking her eyes as she turned to the others.

No one, however, had smiled; all sympathized with a motion of their chins. And the child, whose gaze had fallen upon a ring she wore, kissed it tearfully.

"That's all I've had given me of hers. Grand-mamma took it off her finger and put it on mine. She wore it for twenty years, and I shall keep it all my life."

It was an old wedding ring, one of those trinkets of coarse, common jewellery, from which the chasing had almost disappeared. One felt that the hand on which it had got so worn was one that shrank from no toil, was perpetually employed, washing things up, making beds, scrubbing, polishing, dusting, thrusting itself everywhere. And it told such stories, that ring—its gold had been left in such strange places, that the men contemplated it intently, their nostrils extended, without a word.

"When you've worn it down as much as your mother did," said M. Charles, choking with a sudden emotion, "you'll have earned your rest. If it spoke, it would tell you how much money is made by orderliness and hard work."

Élodie was in tears; she pressed her lips to the ring again.

"You know," Madame Charles went on, "I want you to use that wedding-ring when we marry you."

But at this last word, at the idea of marriage, the young girl, in the midst of her emotion, experienced such a thrill, such a flood of confusion, that she was overcome and threw herself on her grand-mother's bosom, where she hid her face. The latter soothed her, smilingly.

"Come, come, don't be ashamed, my little lamb. You must get used to it, there's nothing wrong in it. I wouldn't say anything wrong before you, you know. Your cousin, Buteau, asked just now what we were going to do with you. We shall begin by marrying you. . . . Come, come, look at us, don't rub yourself against my shawl; you'll make your skin sore."

Then, to the others, in a whisper, with an air of deep satisfaction:

"Well, isn't she brought up well? She knows nothing, nothing at all."

"Ah, if we hadn't got this angel," concluded M. Charles, "we should really have too much to grieve us, in all that I told

you. Besides, my roses and carnations have suffered this year, and I don't know what's the matter in the aviary; all my birds are ill. The fishing consoles me a little; I caught a trout that weighed three pounds yesterday. When you live in the country, you want to live happily, don't you? "

They separated. The Charles renewed their promise to come and taste the new wine. Fouan, Buteau and Jesus Christ went some steps in silence, then the old man summarized their sentiments.

" He'll be a lucky young chap, anyhow, who gets that youngster and the house with her."

The crier of Rognes had beaten his drum to announce the vintage; and on Monday morning all the country-side was abroad, for every inhabitant had his vine-yard; not a single family would have missed going that morning to their work on the hill side above the Aigre. But what completed the excitement of the village was the fact that the evening before, just at night-fall, the Curé—a Curé whom the Commune had at last decided to indulge in—had disembarked in front of the church. It was so dark at the time that they had hardly seen him. So the tongues wagged unceasingly; all the more so in that the business there had been over it made it really worth their while.

After his rupture with Rognes, the Abbé Godard had for months obstinately refused to set foot there again. He baptized, confessed and married anybody who sought him out at Bazoches-le-Doyen; as for the dead, they would doubtless have crumbled to dust while they waited for him; but this point was never cleared up, as while the great quarrel was on nobody took it into his head to die. He had informed his bishop that he would rather be suspended than take God Almighty into a land of abomination, where they gave Him such a bad reception, where everyone was a chamberer and a drunkard, and had ceased to believe even in the Devil. And the bishop evidently supported him, and allowed things to take their course, awaiting the repentance of the rebel flock. So Rognes was left without a priest;

there were no more Masses, there was nothing; people lived like savages. At first, they were a little surprised at it; but, in their hearts, they thought, faith! things didn't get on any worse than before! They got used to it; it neither rained nor blew any more, not to mention what a big saving it was for the Commune. Then, since a priest was not indispensable, since experience proved that the harvest lost nothing by his absence, and that nobody died any the sooner, it would be just as well to do without one altogether. A great many were of this opinion: not only malcontents, like Lengaigne, but good, sensible folk who could put two and two together. Delhomme, for instance. There were a good many, however, who were annoyed at not having a Curé. It was not that they were more religious than the rest. God was a jesting threat which had ceased to make them tremble: they snapped their fingers at Him. But no Curé! It was as much as to say that they were too poor or too stingy to pay for one. In short, it gave them the appearance of being beneath contempt: mere nobodies, who would not spend ten sous uselessly. The Magnolles people, who only numbered two hundred and eighty-three—ten less than Rognes—kept a Curé. They threw him at their neighbours' heads with a peculiarly offensive laugh, which would certainly have led at last to blows. And then the women had their customs: not one of them would have consented to be married or buried without a priest. The men themselves went to church sometimes, on great festivals, because everyone went. In brief, they had always had Curés, and, bloody well as they could do without them, a Curé they must have!

Naturally, the Municipal Council was torn with this question. The mayor, Hourdequin, who, although he did not practise, was in favour of religion as a principle of authority, made the impolitic mistake of standing aloof from the discussion in his desire to be conciliatory. The Commune was poor. What was the good of burdening it with an outlay beyond its means, which the restoration of the presbytery would entail?—especially as he hoped to induce the Abbé Godard to return. So it was left

for Macqueron, the deputy-mayor, formerly a bitter foe of the black robe, to put himself at the head of the discontented people who were humiliated at not having a Curé of their own. This man (Macqueron) must no doubt have entertained from this time the notion of upsetting Hourdequin in order to take his post, and people said, moreover, that he had become an instrument of M. Rochefontaine, the manufacturer of Châteaudun, who was going to oppose M. de Chédeville, again, at the next election. Just then, as it happened, Hourdequin was worn out with the anxiety of his farm, and took no interest in the sittings of the Council, but left his deputy to act: the result was that the Council, won over by this latter, voted the necessary funds to promote the Commune into a parish. Ever since he had insisted on being paid for his land which had been taken to make the new road, after having promised to make a gift of it, the councillors looked upon him as a rogue, but treated him with extreme respect. Lengaigne, alone, protested against the vote, which, he declared, handed over the village to the Jesuits. Bécu also grumbled at being turned out of the presbytery, and having to take up his abode now in some hovel. For a month, workmen were employed in renewing the plaster, putting in panes of glass, replacing rotten beams; and it was so, finally, that a Curé had been able, only yesterday, to install himself in the little house, which had on a fresh coat of whitewash.

At day-break, the carts started for the hill, each loaded with four or five big casks, one end of which had been knocked out —the "tons," as they called them. Women and girls drove in them with their baskets; whilst the men walked at the side, and whipped up the horses. There was quite a procession of them; and conversation was carried on between one cart and another, in the midst of shouting and laughter.

It was precisely Lengaigne's trap which followed that of the Macquerons', so that Flore and Cœlina, who had not been on speaking terms for six months, thanks to this accident, were reconciled. The former had La Bécu with her, the latter, her

daughter Berthe. The conversation turned immediately on the Curé. The sentences, broken up by the noise of the horses' hoofs, were launched at random through the fresh morning air.

"I saw him, I did, helping to get out his box."

"Ah! . . . What's he like?"

"Lord! It was getting dark! . . . I thought him very tall, and thin, with a long, lenten face, that seemed to have no end to it. About thirty, I should say. He looked gentle."

"And they say he comes from the Auvergne country, the mountains where you're under the snow for two-thirds of the year."

"Mercy! it's him that'll be glad to be with us, then!"

"To be sure it is! And do you know his name is Madeleine?"

"No, Madeline."

"Madeline or Madeleine—neither is a man's name, anyhow."

"Perhaps he'll come and see us in the vines. Macqueron has promised to bring him."

"Ah! is that so? I must have a peep at him!"

The carts drew up at the bottom of the hill, along the road which followed the line of the Aigre. And in each little vineyard, between the lines of props, the women set to work, bent double, their buttocks in the air, as they went along cutting off the bunches with the bill-hook and filling their baskets. As for the men, they had enough to do in emptying the baskets into dossers and then taking down the dossers and emptying them into the tons. The dew had been so heavy that morning that all the dresses were soaked immediately. Luckily, it was magnificent weather, the sun soon dried them. For three weeks there had been no rain; the grapes, over which they were in despair on account of the wet summer, had ripened and grown sweet suddenly; and that was why they were all merry at the grand sunshine, so unusually hot for the season, and laughed and shouted and made dirty jokes, at which the girls simply wriggled.

"That Cœlina," said Flore to La Bécu, standing up and looking at La Macqueron in the adjoining plantation, "you know

how proud she was of her Berthe because of her young, ladylike complexion. Look at the girl, she's withering up and getting a rare yellow! "

"Lord!" declared La Bécu, "when you don't marry your daughters. They made a mistake in not giving her to the wheelwright's son. . . . And besides, if we believe what's said, she ruins her own health with her bad habits."

She started cutting off the bunches again, till her back ached. Then, rocking her buttocks:

"That doesn't prevent the schoolmaster from hanging about her always."

"Good Lord!" cried Flore, "that Lequeu would stick his nose into the dung, if he could pick some coppers out of it. Look! there he is, just come up to help them—the artful dodger! "

They stopped talking. Victor, who had been back from the army barely a fortnight, took their baskets and emptied them into Delphin's dosser; the wily man, Lengaigne, had hired the latter's services for the vintage, pretending that his own presence was required in the shop. And Delphin, who had never left Rognes, and was rooted to the earth like a young oak, gaped with surprise before Victor, with his swagger and his chaff. He was delighted when he could astonish him, and was so altered that no one would have recognized him, with his moustache and his imperial, his air of laughing at everybody, beneath the forage cap which he still wore out of affectation. The fellow made a mistake, however, if he thought he could excite the other's envy; at all the fine tales he told of his garrison exploits, his lies about his debauchery, girls and wine, the rustic shook his head, secretly a little aghast, but in nowise tempted. No, no! the price was too high if it meant leaving one's nest. He had already twice refused to go and seek fortune at Châtres, in a restaurant with Nénesse.

"But you bloody cripple, when you're a soldier you'll have to! "

"Oh, a soldier! . . . Perhaps I shall draw a high number!"

Victor, full of contempt, could not make him budge from this. What a great coward, when he was built like a Cossack too! He went on with his talk, as he emptied the baskets into a hamper, but the beggar was quite unmoved by his attacks. And, jokingly, with a swaggering gesture, he pointed at Berthe, and added:

"I say, do you know if it's grown since I went away?"

Delphin was shaken with a great laugh, for this peculiarity of the Macquerons' daughter was still the prime source of amusement amongst the young folks.

"Oh, I dare say it grew when the spring came."

"You won't find me watering it for her," concluded Victor, with a grimace of repugnance. "I'd as soon go in for a frog. And besides, it can't be wholesome, it must catch cold, that place you know, for want of a wig."

Delphin's merriment grew so vociferous at this that the dosser capsized from off his back, and he descended and emptied it into the ton, while his stifled laughter was still audible.

In the Macquerons' vine-yard, Berthe was playing the young lady, making use of a pair of small scissors instead of a bill-hook; she professed a great horror of thorns and wasps, and was in despair because her thin shoes, that the dew had drenched, would not dry. She was tolerating the attentions of Lequeu, whom she loathed, flattered, however, at being courted by the only man in the place who had any education. He took out his handkerchief at last to dry her shoes. But an unexpected apparition distracted them.

"Gracious!" murmured Berthe, "she *has* got a dress, if you like. I heard she arrived yesterday, at the same time as the Curé."

It was the Lengaignes' daughter, Suzanne, who had risked a sudden re-appearance in her native village, after living a gay life for three years in Paris. Arrived on the previous evening, she had laid in bed late, leaving her mother and brother to go

off to the vintage, and promising to join them later, to surprise the peasants at their work and crush them with the magnificence of her toilette. In effect, the sensation she made was extraordinary, for she had put on a blue silk dress, of a rich blue, before which the blue of the sky paled. Beneath the hot sun which poured upon her, in the open air, standing out in relief against the yellowish-green of the vine-tendrils, she looked really fine, and had a real triumph. She started talking and laughing loudly, at once, nibbled the grapes which she held up and dropped into her mouth, joked with Delphin and her brother Victor, who seemed immensely proud of her, astonished La Bécu and her mother, whose hands hung down, and whose eyes were moist with admiration. Indeed, this feeling of admiration was shared by the grape-pickers in the adjoining plantations; their work was interrupted while they all gazed at her, hardly recognizing her, she had so filled out and improved in appearance. She used to be an ugly girl, but she was mighty attractive now, no doubt owing to the way in which she arranged her pretty fair hair over her forehead. As a result of their curious scrutiny, a feeling of great respect sprang up, she was fitted out so expensively, and was so plump, with her merry, prosperous face. Cœlina, looking bilious, and pursing up her lips, forgot her work too, as she stood between her daughter and Lequeu.

"There's a swell for you! Flore tells everybody who'll listen to her that her daughter keeps servants and carriages, where she comes from. I daresay it's true; you must earn a lot to be able to deck out your body like that."

"Oh, those good-for-nothings," said Lequeu, who was exerting himself to be agreeable, "we all know how they get their money."

"What does it matter how they get it?" answered Cœlina, bitterly, "they've got it, anyhow."

But at this moment, Suzanne, who had caught sight of Berthe, and had recognised one of her old companions of the Children of Mary, came forward agreeably.

"Good-day! You're well, I hope?"

She took a comprehensive look at her, and remarked her devastated complexion. And suddenly she drew herself up—her skin was white as milk—and repeated, laughing:

"You're well, aren't you?"

"Quite well, thank you," answered Berthe, embarrassed, but won over by her.

The Lengaignes carried everything before them to-day. It was a real blow to the Macquerons. Cœlina was beside herself when she compared the yellow leanness of her daughter, who was wrinkled already, with the healthy face, so fresh and rosy, of her rival's daughter. Was it fair, that? A riotous woman, who took on men from morning to night, and who did not look fatigued! A virtuous young girl, as much exhausted by sleeping single as a woman who has been aged by three confinements! No, virtue was not rewarded; it was not worth the trouble of keeping honest in your parents' house!

In fine, the whole vintage *fêted* Suzanne. She kissed the children, who had grown; she deeply affected the old folks by recalling past days to them. You may be what you like, you can do without people when you've made your fortune. And this girl must have a good heart still; she hadn't disowned her family, but had come back to see her friends now that she was rich. At eleven o'clock everybody sat down and ate bread and cheese. It was not that they were hungry, for they had been gorging themselves with grapes since dawn: their throats were sticky with the sweetness, their paunches swollen and round as tubs, and it was bubbling inside them; it was as good as a purge. Already, every few minutes some girl had to steal off and get behind a hedge. Naturally this excited laughter. The men jumped up and cried out, "Oh, oh!" offering to escort them. In short, the air was full of honest merriment. Something wholesome and refreshing. They were finishing their bread and cheese, when Macqueron appeared on the road below with the Abbé Madeline. Suzanne was straightway forgotten; they had no eyes

for anyone but the Curé. Frankly, the impression he made was hardly favourable. He was really like a May-pole, and looked as gloomy as if he were going to bury the Redeemer. However, he made his bow in each vine-yard, said a pleasant word to everybody, and they finished by declaring him to be very polite and amiable, though not strong. They would be able to manage this one. Things would go more smoothly than they had done with that cantankerous, old Abbé Godard. As soon as his back was turned they began to laugh. He had reached the top of the hill, and he stood there motionless, looking out at the flat and sombre immensity of La Beauce, seized with a sort of terror, a despairing melancholy, which brought some moisture into his big, clear, mountain-bred eyes, that were used to the narrow prospects of the gorges of Auvergne.

The Buteaus' vine-yard was situated just there. Lise and Françoise were cutting off the bunches, and Jesus Christ, who had not failed to bring his father, was already elevated by the grapes he had gobbled, while he pretended to be occupied in emptying the baskets into dossers. They made such a ferment inside him, and filled him so full of gas, that wind seemed to come from him everywhere. And the presence of a priest exciting him, it was most indelicate.

"You unmannerly bugger!" cried Buteau to him. "Wait at least till his Reverence is gone."

But Jesus Christ did not accept the reproof. He answered, with the air of a man who could be well-bred when he chose:

"It's not meant for him; it's for my own convenience."

Daddy Fouan had taken a seat on the ground, tired, as he said, but contented at the fine weather and the good vintage. He was inwardly chuckling maliciously at the way in which La Grande, whose vine-yard was next to them, had come over to wish him good-day. She, too, had taken to treat him with respect again, since she knew he had money. Then she left him with a rush, having noticed her grandson Hilarion in the distance taking greedy advantage of her absence to stuff himself

with grapes; and she fell upon him with her stick. Pig and glutton! he spoiled more than he saved.

"Aunt's one that'll make people glad when she dies," said Buteau, sitting down for a moment by his father to flatter him. "It's a nice thing to abuse that innocent because he's as strong and as stupid as a mule."

Then he attacked the Delhommes, who were below them, level with the road. They had the finest vine-yard in the district, nearly five acres in one enclosure, where there were quite a dozen people at work. Their carefully-tended vines produced finer grapes than any that the neighbours harvested; and they were so proud of them that they seemed to be picking quite aloof from the others, and did not even show any signs of mirth at the sudden gripes which sent the girls running off. No doubt it would have broken their legs to have come up and spoken to their father, for they did not seem even to know he was there. What a green-horn he was, that pompous Delhomme, with his affectation of being a hard-working, just man! And that shrew Fanny, always worrying if anything was a hairbreadth out of its place, and expecting people to worship her as if she were a waxen image; she never seemed to think of the dirty tricks she served other people.

"The truth is, father," continued Buteau, "that I'm very fond of you; but as for my brother and sister—you know I'm still quite sick when I think of the way you left us for a lot of rot."

And he saddled the affair on Françoise, whose head, he said, Jean had turned. But she was quiet enough nowadays. If she made any more fuss, he had made up his mind to give her blood a cooling at the bottom of the pond.

"Look here, father, you must think it over. Why shouldn't you come back to us?"

Fouan maintained a discreet silence. He had been expecting this offer with which his younger son, at last, came out; and he preferred neither to answer yes or no, for one never knew.

Then Buteau went on, having assured himself that his brother was at the other end of the vine-yard.

"Don't you see? It's not the place for you to live with that scoundrel, Jesus Christ. You'll be found murdered there one of these fine days. Besides, look here! I—I'll board and lodge you, and pay you the interest just the same."

The father blinked his eyes in stupefaction. As he still made no reply, the son tried to overwhelm him.

"And your dainties, your coffee, your drop of something, four ha'porths of tobacco—in short, just what you like."

It was too much, Fouan took alarm. No doubt, it was not what it had been at Jesus Christ's. But if his troubles began again at the Buteaus?

"We will see," he contented himself with saying, as he rose in order to bring the interview to an end.

They picked the grapes until nightfall. The carts never stopped bearing away the full casks and bringing them back empty. In the vines, that were tinged with gold by the setting sun, beneath the vast pink sky, the passage to and fro of the baskets and the dossers went on busily, in the midst of the intoxication which sprang from all this carrying of grapes. And Berthe met with an accident; she was seized with such a colic that she could not even run off; her mother and Lequeu had to make a rampart round her with their bodies, while she relieved herself. She was observed from the adjoining plantation, Victor and Delphin wanted to take her some paper; but Flore and La Bécu prevented them; there were certain limits which only the badly-brought-up transgressed. At last, they went home. The Delhommes took the lead, La Grande compelled Hilarion to pull with the horse, the Lengaignes and the Macquerons fraternized, in a state of semi-intoxication, beneath which their rivalry was melted. What was especially noticed, was the polite intercourse of the Abbé Madeline and Suzanne; he took her for a lady, no doubt, noticing how much better dressed she was than the others, so that they walked along side by side—he full of

consideration, she as sweet as honey, asking him what time Mass would be on Sunday. Behind them came Jesus Christ, who, in his contempt for the cloth, started again his disgusting pleasantry, with a drunkard's obstinate amusement. Every five paces he lifted his thigh and let one. The girl bit her lip to keep from laughing, the priest pretended not to hear. And, with extreme gravity, accompanied by this music, they continued to exchange pious remarks, at the tail of the moving procession of the vintage.

Just as they were entering Rognes, Buteau and Fouan, feeling ashamed, tried to impose silence on Jesus Christ. But he went on all the same, repeating that his Reverence would be quite wrong if he took offence. "S'help me! Haven't I told you it's not for other people, it's for myself?"

The following week they were invited by the Buteaus to taste their wine. The Charles, Fouan, Jesus Christ, four or five others, were to come at seven o'clock and partake of a leg of mutton, some nuts and cheese—quite a feast. During the day Buteau had poured his wine into six vessels, which were full to the brim. But some of the neighbours were less advanced: one who had not yet finished gathering his grapes had started to crush them that morning, bare to the skin; a second, armed with a long bar, was superintending the fermentation and pushing in the primage in the midst of the bubbling must; a third, who possessed a wine-press, squeezed out the dregs and got rid of them in his court-yard, where they made a reeking heap. And it was the same in each house, with a like result—steaming vats, dripping presses, brimming barrels, over all Rognes there brooded the soul of the wine-god, the strong smell of it alone would have sufficed to intoxicate everyone.

To-day, just as he started from the Castle, Fouan had a misgiving which induced him to take out his deeds from the pot of lentils. It would be as well to hide them on his person, for he fancied he had seen Jesus Christ and Slutty looking up in the air with rather an odd expression. All three of them started off early and reached the Buteaus at the same time as

the Charles. The moon was at its fullest, so large and clear that it lit up things like a very sun; and Fouan, as he entered the yard, noticed the donkey, Gédeon, in the shed, with his head plunged into a small trough. There was nothing surprising in finding him at liberty for the rascal was all over cunning, and could lift the latch easily with his nose; but the trough puzzled him, he drew near and recognized it as the cellar trough, which they had left full of wine from the press, to finish filling the casks. God's truth! that Gédeon was emptying it.

"Hullo! Buteau! come here! Your donkey has got a fine thing on."

Buteau appeared on the threshold of the kitchen.

"What's up? "

"Look—he's drunk the lot! "

Gédeon, in the midst of their shouts, finished guzzling up the liquor placidly. He had very likely been amusing himself in this way for a quarter of an hour, for the little trough must have held at least five gallons. It was all gone; his belly was as round as a tub, ready to burst; and when at last he raised his head wine was dripping down his nose, his drunkard's nose, where a red smudge exactly under his eyes showed how deep his head had gone in.

"The bloody joker! " roared Buteau, running up, "that's just like him. There never was a moke like him for vice."

Generally, when he was reproached with his vices, Gédeon looked indifferent and cocked his long ears. This time, giddy and losing all respect, he positively revelled, and wriggled his back, to express his unrepentant satisfaction with his debauch. And when his master struck him, he staggered.

Fouan had to prop him up with his shoulder.

"Why, the damned beast is dead drunk! "

"Drunk as a lord—that's the way it is," remarked Jesus Christ, contemplating with a feeling of brotherly admiration, "a trough-full at a gulp: what a thirst! "

Buteau was not inclined to laugh, neither were Lise and Fran-

çoise, who ran out at the noise. To begin with, there was the loss of the wine; then, even more than the loss, there was the confusion into which they were thrown by their donkey's misbehaviour in the presence of the Charles. The latter were already pursing up their lips on account of Élodie. To complete their misfortunes, chance willed that Suzanne and Berthe, who were taking a walk together, should run across the Abbé Madeline exactly in front of their door; and they came to a halt, and all three stood there and waited. A nice business to happen, with the eyes of all this fine company fixed on it.

"Shove him, father!" said Buteau, in a low voice. "We must get him into the stable sharp."

Fouan pushed. But Gédeon, quite satisfied and happy where he was, refused to leave the place, not from any spite, but with drunken good humour, his eyes moist and waggish, his mouth gaping, his lip curled in amusement. He made himself heavy and tottered on his straddled legs, pulled himself up after each attack, as though he thought the joke a merry one. And when Buteau interfered and pushed him as well, it did not take long; the donkey tumbled down with his four legs in the air, rolled over on his back, and began to bray so vigorously that he seemed to be telling all the company who were looking on at him to go to the devil.

"Ah, you dirty beast! Good-for-nothing! I'll teach you to make yourself ill again!" bellowed Buteau, falling upon him with fierce kicks.

Full of indulgence, Jesus Christ interposed.

"Come, come, now. Since he's drunk, it's no good expecting him to hear reason. You know he's not listening; it would be much better to help him get home."

The Charles had retired, perfectly shocked at such an extravagant and disreputable animal, whilst Élodie, very red, as if she had witnessed some indecent sight, turned away her head. At the gate the group, composed of the Curé, Suzanne, and Berthe, waited silently, seeming to protest by their attitude.

Neighbours came up and indulged in loud banter. Lise and Françoise were ready to shed tears with shame.

However, Buteau, repressing his wrath, and assisted by Fouan and Jesus Christ, worked away to get Gédeon on his legs again. It was by no means an easy undertaking, for the rascal was as heavy as a hundred thousand devils with the wine that was rumbling in his belly. As soon as they had got him up on one side he rolled over on the other. All three of them were exhausted by propping him up and shoving him with their knees and elbows. At last they succeeded in setting him on all-fours; they had even got him moved on a few steps, when his hindquarters made a sudden genuflection and he tumbled over once more, and the whole yard had to be traversed to reach the stable. They would never get there. What was to be done? "Damnation! damnation!" swore the three men, looking at him from every point of view without knowing in the least how to manage him. Jesus Christ got the idea of propping him against the wall of the shed and getting him round so, following the line of the house as far as the stable. That was all right at first, although the donkey grazed himself against the mortar. Unfortunately the painful friction became, no doubt, too much for his patience. He suddenly slipped from the hands which were pressing him against the wall and made a rush; he kicked furiously.

The father was almost knocked over; the two brothers shouted:

"Stop him! stop him!"

Then, by the brilliant light of the moon, they saw Gédeon tearing about the yard in a frantic zig-zag, with his big ears wagging. They had pulled him about too much; it had made him ill. A preliminary hiccough brought him to a halt; then everything went to pieces. He wanted to start again, but had to stop, planted firmly on his stiffened legs. He stuck out his neck; a terrible billow shook his sides, and with the tempestuous effect of a drunkard relieving himself, pitching his head forward at each effort, he vomited like a man.

A burst of loud laughter came from the peasants who were assembled before the gate, whilst the Abbé Madeline, who had a weak stomach, turned pale between Berthe and Suzanne, and was led away by them, with indignant remarks. But the offended attitude of the Charles said sufficiently plainly what an outrage against good manners the exhibition of a donkey in such a condition was—even against the ordinary politeness that is due to passers-by. Élodie, disturbed and in tears, had flung herself on her grand-mother's bosom, and kept on asking if he was going to die. And M. Charles could shout as much as he liked, "Enough, enough!" in his old dictatorial voice of the master who will be obeyed, the wretch continued; he swamped the yard, it was like the tremendous rush through a sluice, a regular crimson stream which coursed into the pond. Then he fell over, and lay full in it, with his legs extended, and he looked so disgraceful that no drunken man stretched in the middle of the road could have disgusted people more. It was as if the wretched animal had done it on purpose to cover his masters' heads with disgrace. It was too much.

Lise and Françoise hid their eyes with their hands, and fled into the furthest part of the house.

"Oh, have done, do! Carry him away!"

In effect there was nothing else to be done, for Gédeon, limp as an old rag, had sunk into a heavy sleep. Buteau ran to fetch a barrow, and, with the help of six men, got the donkey on the top. They carried him off, with his legs hanging loose, his head drooping; and he was already snoring with such vigour that it seemed as though he were still braying out his contempt of everybody there.

Naturally, the harmony of the evening was a little destroyed at first by this incident. But soon matters improved, and they ended by celebrating the new wine so extensively that, by eleven o'clock, everybody was in the same condition as the donkey. Every moment, somebody was obliged to go out into the yard to relieve himself.

Old Father Fouan was very merry. Perhaps, after all, he would be wise if he went back and boarded with his younger son, for the wine would be good that year. He had been obliged to leave the room in his turn; and his mind was busy with that in the midst of the black night when he heard Buteau and Lise, who had come out behind him, and were squatting side by side against the hedge, quarrelling. The husband was reproaching his wife because she had not been nice enough to the father. The damned fool! They ought to coax him so as to get him back and annex that nest-egg. The old man, sobered, and feeling a cold thrill, quickly assured himself that the papers in his pocket had not been stolen; and when they had all taken an affectionate leave of each other, when he was back at the Castle, he was firmly resolved not to budge from it. But that very night he saw a vision which froze his blood:—Slutty, in her shift, prying about his room, searching his breeches, his blouse, looking even into his shoes. Evidently, Jesus Christ, having noticed the disappearance of the nest-egg from the pot of lentils, had sent his daughter to search for it and "annex it," as Buteau had said.

All at once, Fouan felt unable to rest in his bed, what he had seen was so exercising him. He rose and opened the window. The night was white with moonshine, the odour of the wine floated up from Rognes, mingled with that of the article with which people had been so lavish against the walls for the last week —that formidable bouquet of the vintage. What would become of him? Where should he go? His poor money—he would never part from it, he would sew it to his body. Then, as the wind sent a puff of the prevailing smell to his nostrils, he thought of Gédeon again. It had a fine constitution, a donkey! It could get ten times more pleasure out of things than a man without dying of it. No matter! Robbed at his elder son's, robbed at his younger's, there was no choice. The best course was to remain at the Castle, keeping his eyes open, and wait. All his old bones trembled at the thought.

CHAPTER V

Several months elapsed; winter passed, then the spring, and Rognes went on in its accustomed routine. It took years before anything ever seemed to be done with in that quite uneventful life of labour that was ever being recommenced. In July, however, when the heat of the sun was at its highest, the village was excited by the approach of the elections. This time there was an affair of considerable importance at the bottom of them. People talked it over, and waited for the visit of the candidates.

And it happened to be the particular Sunday on which the coming of M. Rochefontaine, the Châteaudun manufacturer, was announced, when a terrible scene took place at the Buteaus between Lise and Françoise. The result was sufficient proof of the fact that when things look like coming to a halt they move along nevertheless; for the last link which united the two sisters, which had been so constantly on the point of breaking and as constantly renewed, was so worn away, as the result of their daily quarrels, that it snapped asunder never to be restored. And this was brought about by a silly trifle, for which it would have been really not worth while chastising a cat.

That morning, when Françoise took out her cows, she stopped for a moment to talk to Jean, whom she had met opposite the church. It must be admitted that she put a spice of provocation in it, exactly in front of the house, with the express intention of giving the Buteaus annoyance. So when she returned Lise shouted to her:

"I say, when you want to see your men, don't let it be in front of the window."

Buteau was there, employed in sharpening a bill-hook, and he listened.

"My men!" repeated Françoise, "I see too many of them

here—my men! And there's one I know of, and if I had chosen, it's not in front of the window but in your bed that the beast would have had me."

The allusion to Buteau put Lise beside herself. For a long time past she had had but one desire, to drive her sister out and have peace at home, even at the price of half the estate. It was on account of this that she got beaten by her husband, who was of the opposite opinion—resolved to scheme to the last, and who, moreover, had not yet despaired of being able to lie with the girl, since both she and himself possessed all that the game required. And Lise was enraged at not being the mistress, and further tormented by a particular jealousy, she was still willing to let him seduce her younger sister just to have it over, while it maddened her all the time to see him so hot after her, the baggage, for whose youth and small, firm bust and arms, with their white skin beneath the tucked-up sleeves, she was seized with loathing. If she had held the candle, it was with the hope that he might destroy all that. She would have fallen upon it herself, not suffering because of the partition, but suffering in their poisoned rivalry which had grown so tremendous, because her sister was more desirable than herself, and could give more pleasure.

"You slut!" she bellowed, "it's you that led him on. If you weren't always hanging about him, he wouldn't run after your nasty brat's bottom. A lot you're worth!"

Françoise grew very pale, the falsity of the charge was so revolting. She answered deliberately, in cold anger:

"That's right, you've said enough! Wait a fortnight and I shall give you no more trouble, if that's what you want. Yes, in a fortnight I shall be one-and-twenty, then I shall be off."

"Ah, you want to be of age, do you? Ah, that's what you've counted on, just to annoy us. Well, bitch! you needn't wait a fortnight: it's this very instant you'll be off. Get out, and be damned!"

"It's all the same. Somebody is wanted at Macqueron's. He'll be sure to take me. . . . Good-night!"

And Françoise departed; it was no more complicated than that. Nothing more passed between them. Buteau, dropping the bill-hook which he was sharpening, rushed in to restore peace between them with a couple of blows, and reconcile them once more. But he arrived too late; he was only able in his exasperation to launch a blow at his wife which made her nose stream blood. God's truth, what women! It was what he had feared, what he had prevented so long; the little one had flown; it was the beginning of a whole heap of bother! And he saw everything escaping him—the girl and the land.

"I shall go to Macqueron at once," he roared. "She shall came back again, if I have to fetch her with a kick in her backside."

Upon this Sunday, there was great confusion at Macqueron's, for they were expecting one of the candidates, M. Rochefontaine, the owner of the building-sheds at Châteaudun. During the last administration M. de Chédeville had fallen into disfavour, some said through parading his Orleanist relations, others through the scandal he had given to the Tuileries, on account of a disgraceful affair with the young wife of an Usher of the Chamber, who had become infatuated with him in spite of his age. However that might be, the Préfet's protection had been withdrawn from the retiring deputy, to be given to M. Rochefontaine, formerly the candidate of the opposition. A cabinet minister had been down to visit his works, and he had written a pamphlet on Free Trade, which had been particularly remarked by the Emperor. Irritated at this defection, M. de Chédeville stuck to his candidature, as he needed his seat as deputy to keep his head above water; the rents from La Chamade were no longer sufficient, it was so mortgaged, and indeed almost at an end. So that, through a curious accident, the situation was reversed; the big land-owner became the independent candidate, whilst the big manufacturer was the recognized official candidate.

Hourdequin, although he was mayor of Rognes, remained faithful to M. de Chédeville; and he was resolved to take no notice of the commands of the administration, and ready even to fight it out openly, if he was pushed too far. To begin with, he considered it the honourable course not to veer round like a weather-cock at the least breath of the Préfet; then, when it was a question between a protectionist and a free-trader, he decided that his interests were with the former, in the present crisis of the agricultural situation. As for a long time past the annoyance that Jacqueline caused him, joined with the cares of his farm, had prevented him from attending to the mayoralty, he left his deputy, Macqueron, to manage its ordinary business. When, therefore, the interest which he took in the elections brought him back to preside at the Council, he was astonished to find it in rebellion, unbendingly hostile.

It was the result of Macqueron's underhand exertions; his plans had been made with the caution of a savage, and they were at last fulfilled. In this peasant, who had made money, and fallen into habits of idleness, who, dirty and ill-kempt, dragged through a life of gentlemanly leisure which made him die of *ennui*, there had sprung up, little by little, an ambition to become mayor, which was henceforth the solitary distraction of his existence. And he had undermined Hourdequin, making capital out of the keen hatred, innate in the heart of every inhabitant of Rognes against the Seigneurs of old, and turning it against the citizen's son who owned the land to-day. Be very sure he had got it for nothing, the land! It was an absolute robbery at the time of the Revolution! No danger of us poor devils profiting by a good chance, it went back always to the scum, who filled their pockets till they were tired! Not to mention the nice state of things which existed at La Borderie. It was a scandal! This Cognette, whose master used to fetch her in preference out of the beds of his farm-hands! All that was stirred up, and circulated in crude words through the countryside, exciting indignation even from people who would have out-

raged or sold their own daughters if such misconduct had been made worth their while. So that the councillors finished by declaring that as for a gentleman, he ought to stay and swindle, and chamber with gentle-folks; whereas properly to conduct a peasant Commune required a peasant mayor.

It was, precisely, on the subject of the elections that a preliminary resistance astonished Hourdequin. When he spoke of M. de Chédeville every face grew wooden. Macqueron, as soon as he saw that he was going to stick to the disgraced candidate, told himself that he had reached the proper battlefield: an excellent opportunity to upset him. So he supported the Préfet's candidate, M. Rochefontaine, crying out that everybody who respected order should stand by the Government. This profession of faith sufficed; and he had no need to indoctrinate the members of the Council, for in their terror of new brooms they were always on the winning side, and determined to give their support to the stronger party, to the master, so that there might be no change and the price of wheat might keep high. Delhomme, the just and honest, who was of this opinion, carried with him Clou and the others. And what compromised Hourdequin most effectually was the fact that only Lengaigne was with him, through his exasperation at the importance which Macqueron had acquired. Calumny was brought in: the farmer was accused of being a "red," one of those beggars who wanted a republic to help them crush down the peasantry; so much so that the Abbé Madeline, in alarm, believing he owed his living to the deputy, himself recommended M. Rochefontaine, in spite of the bishop's adhesion being secretly given to M. de Chédeville. But a last stroke made the mayor totter; a rumour got about that at the time of the opening of the famous direct road from Rognes to Châteaudun he had put half the voted subsidy in his own pocket. How? That was not explained; the story remained scandalous and mysterious. When he was questioned on the matter, Macqueron assumed a frightened expression, looked discreetly grieved, like a man whose mouth was seated by certain conventions.

Actually, it was he who had invented the thing. In fine, the Commune was turned topsy-turvy, the Municipal Council divided in two,—on one side the deputy and all the councillors, with the exception of Lengaigne, on the other the mayor, who grasped then, for the first time, the gravity of the situation.

A fortnight before, already, in the course of a journey made on purpose to Châteaudun, Macqueron had gone and grovelled before M. Rochefontaine. He had implored him not to get down anywhere else except at his house if he condescended to come to Rognes, and that was why the inn-keeper, after breakfast on this Sunday, kept on coming out to the road on the watch for his candidate. He had informed Delhomme, Clou, and the other municipal councillors, who were waiting patiently while they emptied a bottle. Old Father Fouan and Bécu were there likewise, having a game, as well as Lequeu, the schoolmaster, who was absorbed in the perusal of a newspaper that he had brought with him, and who made an affectation of never drinking anything. But two of his customers made the deputy-mayor uneasy—Jesus Christ and his friend Canon, the workman, who tramped the roads, installed opposite each other, with their jeering looks, in front of a bottle of brandy. He cast stealthy glances at them, seeking vainly for some excuse to turn them out, but the rascals were not noisy, as was their custom—they only looked as though they snapped their fingers at everything. Three o'clock struck. M. Rochefontaine, who had promised to be at Rognes about two, had not yet arrived.

"Cœlina!" asked Macqueron of his wife, anxiously, "have you brought up the Bordeaux, to offer a glass presently?"

Cœlina, who was serving, made a gesture of despair at her omission, and he rushed down himself to the cellar. In the neighbouring room, where the draper's store was carried on, the door of which was always left open, Berthe was showing some pink ribbons to three peasant girls, and she had the elegant manner of a shop-girl; whilst Françoise, already entered on her duties, was dusting the shelves in spite of its being Sunday.

The deputy-mayor, who was puffed out with a need of importance, had immediately received the latter, flattered that she had put herself under his protection. He would board and lodge the girl until he should have reconciled her with the Buteaus. If they took her back by force, she vowed that she would kill herself there.

Suddenly, a landau, drawn by two magnificent Perche horses, drew up before the door. And M. Rochefontaine, who was alone, got down from it, astounded and annoyed to find nobody there. He was debating whether he should enter the inn, when Macqueron returned from the cellar with a bottle in each hand. It threw him into the deepest confusion, he was in absolute despair, not knowing how to disembarrass himself of the bottles; he stammered out:

"Oh! Monsieur, what a piece of bad luck! . . . For the last two hours I've waited without moving; and I go down just for one minute—— Yes, and on your account. . . . Will you accept a glass, Monsieur le Député? "

M. Rochefontaine, who was still only a candidate, and who might have been touched by the poor man's confusion, seemed to take fresh offence at it. He was a tall man, of barely eight-and-thirty, with cropped hair, a beard trimmed squarely; he was dressed with a correction which had nothing studied about it. He had a brusque, cold manner, a quick, imperious voice, and everything about him told that he was used to command, to the obedience in which he kept the twelve hundred workmen in his shops. He seemed equally determined to drive these peasants at the whip's lash.

Cœlina and Berthe ran forward; the latter gave him a bold, clear glance from beneath her worn eyelids.

"Would you come in, Monsieur! Give us the honour."

But the gentleman had turned his head, and in one glance weighed and thoroughly apportioned her. He entered, however, kept standing, refused to take a seat.

"These are our friends of the Council," went on Macqueron,

who was recovering. "They are delighted to make your acquaintance. Delighted, are you not, gentlemen?"

Delhomme, Clou, the others had risen, impressed by the haughty attitude of M. Rochefontaine. And it was in a profound silence that they listened to the things he had stopped there to tell them; the ideas he shared with the Emperor, his progressive ideas more especially, thanks to which he had been able to replace in the favour of the government the former candidate, whose opinions were condemned. Then he went on to promise roads, railways, canals. Yes! a canal across La Beauce, to quench, at last, the thirst which had parched it for centuries. The peasants opened their mouths in stupefaction. What was it he said? Water in the fields at that time of day! He resumed; he finished by threatening them with the penalties of the law and the ingratitude of the seasons if they voted wrong. Everybody looked at each other. This was a rousing gentleman, and it was good to be his friend!

"No doubt, no doubt," repeated Macqueron, at each sentence from the candidate, a little uneasy all the same at his rough manner.

But Bécu approved this military tone with emphatic nods of his chin, and old Fouan, with gleaming eyes, seemed to be saying—there's a man for you; and Lequeu himself, generally so impassive, grew very red, although frankly it was impossible to tell whether it was with pleasure or annoyance. There were only the two vagabonds, Jesus Christ, and his friend Canon, who were full of an evident contempt, and, for the rest, felt so superior that they were content to sneer and shrug their shoulders.

As soon as he had finished speaking, Mr. Rochefontaine turned towards the door. The deputy-mayor gave a grieved cry.

"What! monsieur, you won't do us the honour of taking a glass of wine?"

"No, thanks! I am late already. I am expected at Magnolles, at Bazoches, and a score more places. Good afternoon!"

Berthe did not even show him out; and as she went back into

the draper's store, she remarked to Françoise: "I call him very impolite. If it was me, I'd elect the other, the old gentleman!"

M. Rochefontaine had just mounted into his landau when the crack of a whip caused him to turn his head. It was Hourdequin, who had come up in his modest gig, driven by Jean. The farmer had only heard of the visit of the manufacturer to Rognes by a mere chance, and he had hastened to see the peril at close quarters, all the more anxious in that for the last week he had been urging M. de Chédeville to show himself, and had not been able to detach him, no doubt, from some petticoat; perhaps that of the pretty usheress.

"What! it's you!" he cried, genially, to M. Rochefontaine. "I didn't know you had taken the field already."

The two carriages came alongside of each other, wheel to wheel. Neither man got out, but they conversed for a few minutes, after having leant over to shake hands. They were acquainted, having lunched together sometimes with the mayor of Châteaudun.

"You are against me, then?" M. Rochefontaine asked, promptly, in his rough way.

Hourdequin, who, because of his position of mayor counted on not acting too openly, was put out of countenance for an instant at discovering that this devil of a fellow was kept so well informed. But he, no more than the other, lacked stoutheartedness, and he replied in gay tones, in order to give the explanation an amicable turn:

"I'm against nobody; I am for myself. My man is whoever will give me Protection. Only imagine that wheat has fallen to sixteen francs, exactly what it costs me to produce it! One might just as well throw down one's tools and die!"

The other grew excited at once.

"Ah, yes, Protection; so that's it? An exorbitant tax, a right of prohibiting foreign wheat, so that French wheat will double its price! In short, France in a state of famine, twenty sous

for a four-pound loaf, and the poor driven to death! How can you, a man of progress, dare to return to such a monstrous state of things? "

"A man of progress, a man of progress," repeated Hourdequin, with his genial air, "no doubt I'm that; but it costs me so dear that soon I shan't be able to indulge in the luxury. Machinery, chemical manure, all the new methods, they are very fine, very reasonable—they've only one disadvantage, they ruin you in a sound, logical manner."

"Because you are impatient, because you expect science to give you immediate and complete results, because you are so discouraged by the necessary experiments that you doubt of accepted truths, and end by denying everything."

"That may be. You mean I've done nothing but make experiments. Well! Tell them to decorate me for that, to make the other worthy fellows follow my example."

Hourdequin broke out into a loud laugh at his joke; it seemed to him conclusive. M. Rochefontaine had taken him up quickly:

"So, then, you want the artizan to die of starvation? "

"I beg your pardon! I want the peasant to be able to live."

"But look at me;—I employ twelve hundred workmen; I can't raise their wages, however, without becoming bankrupt. If wheat was at thirty francs, I should see them drop down like flies."

"Well, and I—have I no men? When wheat is at sixteen francs we have empty bellies; poor devils in the country districts die in every ditch."

Then he added, with another laugh:

"Lord! every man sticks up for his own. If I don't sell you bread dear, the land of France goes bankrupt; and if I sell it you dear, it's commerce which puts its shutters up. You pay more wages, and manufactured products rise in price—my implements, my clothes, a hundred things which I need. Ah, it's a pretty mess! we shall finish by coming a cropper."

Both men, the farmer and the manufacturer, the protectionist

and the free-trader, looked at each other full, the one with a laugh of affected heartiness, the other with the frank boldness of hostility. It was the condition of modern warfare, the actual economic battle on the field of the struggle for life.

"The peasant must be compelled to feed the artizan," said M. Rochefontaine.

"Take care, then," repeated Hourdequin, "that the peasant has something to eat first."

And he jumped out of his gig, and the other threw the name of some village to his coachman, just as Macqueron, disturbed at noticing that his friends on the Council, who had come out to the threshhold, had overheard, cried out they would all have a glass together. But again the candidate refused; and he did not even shake anyone's hand, but lay back in the landau, which started off to the tune of the clattering hoofs of the big Percheron horses.

From the other corner of the road, Lengaigne, who was standing at his door employed in stropping a razor, had taken in the scene. He gave an insulting laugh, and shouted out loudly, so that his neighbour might hear:

"Kiss my arse, and say thank you."

Hourdequin, however, had entered and accepted a glass.

As soon as Jean had tied the horse to one of the shutters, he followed his master. Françoise, in the draper's store, made a little sign to attract him. She told him of her flight, the whole history; and he was so moved by it, so afraid of compromising her before people, that he returned and sat on a bench in the wine-shop, after having merely whispered to her that he must see her again, in order to come to an understanding.

"Ah! good God! You're not particular, anyhow, if you vote for that fellow!" cried Hourdequin, as he set down his glass.

His interview with M. Rochefontaine had made him decide on open war, whatever such a course might involve. And he gave him no more consideration, compared him with M. de Chédeville, who was such a good fellow, not a bit proud, always

glad to oblige people, in short a true nobleman of old France! Whereas this great wind-bag, this up-to-date millionaire—why, he looked down at people from such a pinnacle of greatness that he refused to taste the wine of the country, no doubt for fear of being poisoned! Come, come, it wasn't possible! People didn't change sound horses for lame ones, like that!

"Tell me, what complaint have you against M. de Chédeville? He's been your member for years and years, and he's always done what you wanted. And you desert him for a beggar whom you treated as a vagabond at the last election, when the Government opposed him; the devil, you did—just remember!"

Macqueron, not wishing to be mixed up in the dispute directly, pretended to be helping his wife to serve. All the peasants had listened with stolid faces, in which there was not a wrinkle to betray what was their secret thought. It was Delhomme who replied:

"When you don't know a man."

"But you know him now, that owl! You've heard him say that he wants wheat cheap, that he'll vote for foreign wheat to come in and swamp ours. I have explained to you what that means already—absolute ruin. And if you are foolish enough to believe him after that, when he makes you his fine promises! Yes, yes, vote for him! He'll make you sorry for it later."

A vague smile had gleamed on Delhomme's tanned face. All the dormant shrewdness which underlay his just but narrow intelligence was apparent in a few halting sentences.

"He says what he says, we believe as much of it as we like. . . . Him or another, good Lord! There's only one thing, do you see, that the Government should be strong to keep things going; and then, do you see, so as not to make a mistake about it, it's best to return to the Government the member it wants. It's enough for us that this gentleman from Châteaudun is the Emperor's friend."

At this last thrust Hourdequin was thunderstruck. But it was M. de Chédeville who of old was the Emperor's friend! Oh!

race of serfs, always for the master who whips and feeds you, as confirmed to-day as ever in your hereditary abasement and egoism, without thought or knowledge of anything beyond your daily bread!

"Very well, blast you! I swear that the day which sees this Rochefontaine elected, I'll be damned if I don't resign! Do you take me for a puppet to dance to any tune that's played? If those scoundrelly Republicans were at the Tuileries, upon my word, you would be with them."

Macqueron's eyes had given a flash. In fine, the thing was done; the mayor had signed his abdication; for such was his unpopularity that the engagement he had taken would have sufficed alone to make the whole country-side vote against M. de Chédeville.

But at this moment Jesus Christ, who, with his friend Canon, had been forgotten in a corner, jeered so loud that every eye was turned upon him. With his elbows on the table, his chin resting on his hands, he repeated at the top of his voice, with contemptuous laugher, as he looked at the peasants who were there:

"Set of sh—s! Set of sh—s!"

And it was hard upon this epigram that Buteau entered. His quick eye, as soon as the door was opened, had discovered Françoise in the draper's store, and recognized Jean at the same time seated against the wall waiting for his master. Good! the girl and the lover were there; we should see.

"Look! there's my brother, the biggest of the lot!" bellowed Jesus Christ.

A threatening growl arose; they talked of chucking the foul-mouthed fellow out, when Leroi, nicknamed Canon, interfered, with his hoarse, cockney voice, which had wrangled at all the Socialist meetings in Paris.

"Hold your jaw, my lad! They are not such fools as they look. Look here, you just listen, you peasants; what would you say if they posted on the door of the *Mairie* opposite a placard

with this printed on it, in big letters: ' Revolutionary Commune of Paris: firstly, all taxes are abolished; secondly, military service is abolished. . . . ' Well? What would you say, my earth-grubbers? "

The effect was so tremendous that Delhomme, Fouan, Clou, Bécu, all gaped with wide-open eyes. Lequeu dropped his paper; Hourdequin, who was on the point of departure, came in again; Buteau, forgetting Françoise, sat down on the corner of a table. They all gazed at this rapscallion, this vagabond of the roads, who was the terror of the country-side, and lived by theft and forced alms. Last week, he had been driven away from La Borderie, where he had appeared like a ghost at the close of day. That was why he was stopping now with that rogue, Jesus Christ, whence, perhaps, on the morrow he would again disappear.

" I thought that would tickle you in the right place, anyhow," he went on gaily.

" God's truth, yes! " Beteau admitted. " To think it was only yesterday I paid some more money to the collector! There's no end to it, they strip you of your very skin."

" And not to see your boys go off, faith! " cried Delhomme. " There's me, who pays to get Nénesse exempted; I know what that costs me."

" Not to mention," added Fouan, " that if you can't pay, they take them from you, and kill them."

Canon tossed his head with a laugh of triumph.

" You see," he said to Jesus Christ, " they're not such fools as all that, these earth grubbers! "

Then, turning round again:

" They are always shouting that you're conservatives, that you won't let us act. . . . Conservatives of your own interests, ain't you? You'll allow and help to bring about anything that's to your own advantage—won't you? To save your pence and your children, you would commit a good many things! Otherwise you would be precious idiots! "

No one drank any more; uneasiness began to dawn on the

heavy faces. He went on maliciously, amused in advance at the effect he was going to produce.

"And that's why I'm not disturbed—I, who know you, when you drive me from your doors with stones. As that big gentleman said just now, you'll be with us, the reds, the sharers, when we're at the Tuileries."

"Ah, no! never that!" cried Buteau, Delhomme, and the rest all at once.

Hourdequin, who had listened attentively, shrugged his shoulders.

"You're wasting your breath, my good man!"

But Canon continued to smile with the fine confidence of a believer. Leaning with his back to the wall, he rubbed first one shoulder against it and then the other, with a waddling motion that was like an unconscious caress. And he explained the thing, this revolution, the announcement of which, mysterious and dimly understood from farm to farm, alarmed both masters and men. To begin with, the comrades in Paris would lay hold of power; that might come to pass naturally; they would have to shoot fewer people than they imagined—the whole fabric was so rotten that it would fall to pieces of itself. Then, when once they were the absolute masters, with their first day they would suppress all rents, lay hold of big fortunes in such a manner that the total wealth in money as well as the implements of labour should return to the nation, and they would organise a new society, a vast financial firm, industrial and commercial—a logical re-division of labour and capital. In the country it would be even more simple. They would begin by dispossessing the landowners; they would appropriate the soil. . . .

"Just try!" interrupted Hourdequin again: "they will meet you with pitch-forks. There is not one little proprietor who will let you take as much as a handful."

"Did I say we were going to bother the poor?" replied Canon, banteringly. "We should be fine green-horns to have

a row with the small people. . . . No, no, from the first we shall respect the land of poor devils who wear themselves out farming a few acres. . . . And all we shall take will be the two hundred hectares of big gentlemen like you, who make their men get money for them in the sweat of their brows. God's truth! I don't think your neighbours will come and protect you with their pitch-forks. They'll be only too pleased! "

Macqueron had burst out into a loud laugh, as though he saw the thing as a joke; the others followed his example; and the farmer grew pale—he recognized the ancient hatred. That beggar was right, there was not one of those peasants, not even the most honest, who would not have helped to rob him of La Borderie.

" Then," asked Buteau, gravely, " I, who own about ten *setiers*, I can keep them, they'll leave me them."

" Of course they will, comrade! Only, it's certain that, later on, when you see the results obtained all round you, in the national farms, you'll come, without any pressing, and throw your piece in. Farming on a large scale, with plenty of money, and machinery, and other things beside—everything that's best in the scientific way. As for me, I don't know much about it, but you should hear them talk about it at Paris, and explaining beautifully that it's bloody well finished with farming, unless people make up their minds to work it so! . . . Yes, you yourself will give your land."

Buteau made a gesture of profound incredulity, not understanding, but re-assured, however, since he would be asked for nothing; whilst Hourdequin, his curiosity excited, since the man had embarked on the topic of this great national farm, lent once more a patient ear to him. The others waited for the end, as though they were at a play. Twice, Lequeu, whose pale face was crimson, had opened his mouth to interpose; and each time, like a prudent man, he had held his tongue.

" And my share—mine! " cried Jesus Christ, suddenly.

"Everyone must have his share. Liberty, equality, fraternity!"

Canon suddenly lost his temper; he raised his hand as though to strike the comrade.

"Hold your bloody row, with your liberty, equality, and fraternity! What's the good of being free? It's a fine farce! You want the bourgeois to get their feet on us again, I suppose. No, no; the people will be compelled to be happy, willy-nilly! . . . What! do you consent to be the equal, the brother of ā broker? Why, you foolish bugger, it was by swallowing such rot that the Republicans of '48 made such a mess of their dirty business!"

Jesus Christ was nonplussed; he declared that he was for the Great Revolution.

"You make me sweat—hold your tongue! What? '89, '93! Yes, a pretty song! A nice set of lies they deafen our ears with! Does that count, that humbug? Beside, what's left for us to do? You'll see that when the people are masters; and it won't be put off long. Everything is smashing up; I promise you, our age, as they say, will end in a much bigger flare than the last. It will be a famous wash-up, a dusting the like of which has never been!"

All shuddered, even the drunkard Jesus Christ himself was repelled; he was disgusted and alarmed as soon as he heard they were to be no longer brothers. Jean, interested thus far, also made a gesture of repulsion. But Canon had risen with flaming eyes, his face beaming with prophetic ecstasy.

"And it must happen, it's fated—just as if it were a pebble that is thrown into the air—it's obliged to fall. And there'll be no more parsons' tales of things of the other world, right and justice—things one's never seen any more than one's seen Almighty God! No, there'd be naught beyond the need we all have to be happy. There, my buggers, understand that there'll be an agreement that everyone has a free hand, with the least possible amount of work. . . . The machines will work for us; the day of simple supervision won't be more than four hours

—perhaps even we shall come to folding our arms altogether; and there'll be pleasure everywhere; every need cultivated and satisfied. Yes! meat, and wine, and women, and three times as much as we can stand now, because we shall be in better condition. No more poor, no more sick, no more old age, because things will be better organised and life will be less hard, and there'll be good hospitals and good houses to retire to. It'll be Paradise! The whole of science will be used to make things easy! There'll be real pleasure, then, in being alive! "

Buteau grasped the idea. He struck his fist on the table and shouted:

" To hell with taxes! To hell with the Conscription! To hell with every bother. Nothing but pleasure! . . . I agree! "

" To be sure," declared Delhomme, with his wise air, " a man would be his own enemy not to agree."

Fouan approved, as did Macqueron, Clou, and the rest.

Bécu, stupefied and outraged in his ideas of authority, came and asked Hourdequin, in a whisper, whether he hadn't better thrash this ruffian, who was attacking the Emperor, but the farmer calmed him with a shrug of his shoulders. Happiness, oh, yes! They dreamt it would come by science, as they had dreamt it would come by laws; it was perhaps more logical; in any case, it was not a thing of the morrow. And he was starting off once more, had called to Jean, who was absorbed in the discussion, when Lequeu suddenly succumbed to his need to intervene—it had been stifling him, like some repressed passion.

" Unless," he began, in his shrill voice, " unless you are all killed before this fine state of things comes to pass. Dead of hunger, or shot by the military, if hunger makes you troublesome."

They gazed at him without understanding.

" Certainly, if wheat continues to come from America, in fifty years there won't be a single peasant left in France. . . . Do you think our soil can compete with that over yonder? Be-

fore we've really begun to try proper farming we shall be deluged with their grain. I've read a book which set it out at length: it's you others who are done for. . . ."

But in the midst of his excitement he grew suddenly conscious of all those startled faces turned towards him. And he did not even complete his sentence; he finished with an angry gesture, and then affected to be absorbed once more in a perusal of his newspaper.

"It is, indeed, American wheat that will do for you, so long as the people don't lay hands on the big estates."

"And for my part," concluded Hourdequin, "I repeat to you that this wheat must not come in. After that, vote for Monsieur Rochefontaine, if you've had enough of me at the *Mairie*, and if you want to see wheat at fifteen francs."

He mounted into his gig, followed by Jean. Then, as the latter whipped up the horse, after having exchanged a glance of understanding with Françoise, he said to his master, who gave an approving nod of his head:

"One mustn't think too much of those fancies, or one would go off one's head."

In the wine-shop, Macqueron was speaking to Delhomme in a rapid undertone, whilst Canon, who had resumed his air of indifference to everybody, was finishing the brandy and chaffing the annoyed Jesus Christ, whom he called "Mademoiselle Ninety-three." But Buteau, issuing from a reverie, noticed suddenly that Jean was gone, and he was surprised to discover Françoise there, at the door of the room, where she had taken up her station with Berthe in order to listen. He was vexed with himself that he should have wasted his time over politics, when he had important business in hand. Those confounded politics, they did get a grip of you all the same. He had in a corner a long interview with Cœlina, who finished by dissuading him from making an immediate scandal. It would be much better if Françoise was to return to him of her own accord, when she was calmer. And he also departed, with a threat to

come back and fetch her with a rope and a stick, if they did not make her consent.

On the ensuing Sunday, M. Rochefontaine was elected deputy, and Hourdequin, having handed in his resignation to the Préfet, Macqueron at last became mayor, and was ready to burst out of his skin with insolent triumph. That evening Lengaigne was caught in the act of taking down his breeches outside the door of his victorious rival. And he bellowed:

"I can do it where I've a mind to now we're governed by swine."

CHAPTER VI

The week passed. Françoise was firm in her refusal to return to her sister, and there was an abominable scene on the road: Buteau was dragging her by the hair, and he had to let go, bitten savagely in the thumb. Macqueron took alarm, and showed the young girl the door himself, declaring that, as a representative of authority, he could not encourage her any longer in her rebellion.

But La Grande chanced to be passing, and she took Françoise in. At the age of eighty-eight the only pre-occupation she had with her death was with the view of leaving her heirs, with her fortune, the worry of an endless law-suit. Her will was an extraordinary complication, deliberately involved. By it, under the pretext of wronging nobody, she meant to set everybody by the ears. It was her own idea, since she could not take her belongings with her, to depart at least with the consolation of knowing that they would poison the lives of those who were left. In the same way, she had no greater amusement than seeing her family rending each other. So she hastened to establish her niece in her house. For an instant her stinginess had protested against it, but she was quickly convinced, on the ground that she would secure the utmost amount of labour for the least quantity of food. In effect, the very first evening she made her wash the stairs and the kitchen. Then when Buteau presented himself she received him standing, with her wicked face like that of some old bird of prey; and he, who had talked of smashing up everything at Macqueron's, trembled and stammered, paralyzed by his hope of the inheritance, not daring to enter into conflict with the terrible Grande.

"I require Françoise; I shall keep her, as she is not happy with you. . . . Besides, she is of age: you have an account to render to her. We must talk about that."

Buteau departed furiously. He was horrified at all the bother which he foresaw.

A week later—in effect, about the middle of August—Françoise was one-and-twenty. She was her own mistress henceforth. But she had hardly done more than change her form of hardship, for she, too, trembled before her aunt, and wore herself out with work in that cold and miserly house, where everything had to shine naturally, although one was to use neither brushes nor soap—cold water and one's bare arms: that was sufficient. One day, for having been so forgetful as to give some grain to the fowls, she nearly got her head broken with a blow from the stick. People said that, in her anxiety to spare her horses, La Grande harnessed her grand-son Hilarion to the plough; and if that was an invention, it was the simple truth that she treated him like an animal, beating him, killing him with labour, and abusing his brute strength until he dropped down dead with weariness; and she gave him so little to eat, moreover—crusts and pieces, such as she threw the pig—that he was always half-starved in the abasement of his terror. When Françoise realized that she was to be his yoke-fellow, to complete the pair, she had only one desire—to leave the house. And it was then that suddenly the wish came to her to get married. She was simply anxious to end the thing. Sooner than be reconciled with Lise, she would have killed herself; she was stubbornly set on one of those ideas of what was just, which had vexed her as a mere child. Her cause was the only right cause; she despised herself for having been patient so long; and she was dumb on the subject of Buteau; she only spoke bitterly of her sister, though without him it would have been possible to continue living together. At present, now that everything was over, and over for good, she lived in the single hope of recovering her property—her share of the inheritance. That racked her from morning to night; she was irritated that formalities were necessary, which one could not avoid. Why should there be? This is mine, and that is thine: it ought not to take three minutes.

Did it mean that they were in a conspiracy to rob her? She suspected the whole family; reached a point when she declared that only one person, a man, a husband, could extricate her. No doubt Jean did not possess as much land as you could hold in your hand, and he was fifteen years her elder. But no other lad had courted her; probably not one would have ventured to do so, on account of the business with Buteau, who was so feared in Rognes that no one wanted to have him for an enemy. Then, besides—she had gone with Jean once. That was of no great consequence, since it had led to nothing; only he was very kind, very honest. It might just as well be he, since she cared for no one else, and she must take somebody, no matter whom, to protect her, and anger Buteau. She, too, would have a man of her own. Jean, on his side, had retained a great kindness toward her in his heart. His passion to possess her had calmed down, greatly because of the length of time during which he had desired her. He returned to her no less, very handsomely, looking upon himself as her man, since their vows had been exchanged. He had waited patiently for her majority, without opposing her desire for delay; on the contrary, he had endeavoured to hinder her from putting herself in the wrong with her sister. At present, she could give more reasons than were enough to enlist honest folk on her side. So that, while he blamed the abrupt manner of her departure, he assured her again that she had the ball at her feet. In fine, when she cared to talk of the sequel he was ready.

The marriage was settled so one evening when he had come to meet her behind La Grande's shed. An old, worm-eaten gate opened there on a blind alley, and they were both leaning on it, he without, she within; a rivulet of liquid manure coursed between them.

"Look here, Corporal," she was the first to say, looking into his eyes, "if that pleases you still, it pleases me now."

He, too, looked at her intently; he answered in slow tones: "I didn't speak of it to you, because it would have looked as

if I wanted your fortune. . . . But you are right all the same; now is the time."

Silence reigned. He laid his hand on the hand of the young girl, which was resting on the gate. Then he went on:

"You mustn't torment yourself about La Cognette and the stories that have been going round. . . . This three years I have not so much as touched her."

"It's the same with me," she declared; "I don't want you to be annoyed with the thought of Buteau. The beast boasts everywhere that he's had me. . . . Perhaps you believe it?"

"Everybody in the place believes it," he murmured, to evade her question.

Then, as she kept her eyes fixed on him:

"Yes, I did believe it. And truly, I understood it; for I know the blackguard! You can't do anything but submit."

"Oh! he's tried; he's knocked my body about enough! But if I swear to you that he has never been successful, will you believe me?"

"I believe you."

To show his satisfaction he resumed possession of her hand, clasped it tightly in his own, leaning on the gate with his arm. Noticing that the overflow from the shed was wetting his shoes, he shifted his position.

"You seemed so contented to stay with him, that I thought it might have pleased you—being pawed about by him."

She looked ill at ease; her gaze, so frank and direct, was lowered.

"All the more as you would never go with me again, do you remember? No matter; that child I was so mad at not getting —it's better now that it's still to get. It's more fitting, anyhow."

He broke off; he reminded her that she was in the water.

"Take care, you'll wet yourself."

She shifted her feet in her turn. She concluded:

"We're agreed, then?"

"We're agreed. Fix any date you like."

And they did not even kiss one another; they shook hands, like good friends, across the gate. Then each departed in his own direction.

That evening, when Françoise spoke of her wish to marry Jean, explaining that she required a husband to see her righted, for a moment La Grande made no reply. She stood straight and tall, with her round eyes; she was calculating the loss and gain, the pleasure it would give her; and it was not till the next morning that she approved of the marriage. All night, on her mattress, she had pondered over the affair—for she hardly ever slept now—devising things that would be annoying to the family. This marriage seemed to her so big with consequences to everybody that it made her burn with quite a youthful fever. Already, she foresaw the least bit of bother that it would cause, and she complicated it, and made it deadly. So that, finally, she declared to her niece that she would take charge of everything out of kindness. And she made this remark, accentuating it with a terrible shake of her stick: since she was deserted, she herself would be a mother to her; and people should just see!

In the first place, La Grande summoned her brother Fouan before her, to talk of his accounts as a guardian. But the old man could give only one explanation. If he had been appointed guardian, it was no fault of his; and, moreover, since M. Baillehache had done everything, it was M. Baillehache who ought to be approached in the matter. Besides, as soon as he saw that they were working against the Buteaus, he exaggerated his attitude of ignorance. Old age and the consciousness of his weakness had rendered him bewildered, a coward, at the mercy of all. Why then should he fall out with the Buteaus? Twice already he had almost gone back to them, after nights of horror, when he had shuddered to see Jesus Christ and Slutty prying about his room, diving their bare arms into his very bolster to rob him of his papers. Without a doubt he would end by being murdered at the Castle, unless he took his departure some eve-

ning. La Grande, not being able to get anything out of him, dismissed him in a state of terror, shouting out that he should be brought to justice if the child's share had been touched. Delhomme, whom, as one of the family council, she terrified next, went home quite ill, so much so that Fanny ran round, when his back was turned, to say that they would sooner be out of pocket themselves than have a law-suit. The ball was set rolling; it began to be amusing. The question was to decide whether they should first broach the subject of the partition of the property or proceed straight away to the marriage. La Grande thought the matter over for two nights, then pronounced for an immediate marriage. If Françoise was married to Jean, and assisted by her husband when she claimed her share, the annoyance of the Buteaus would be increased. Then she pressed things on, recovered her young legs, busied herself with her niece's papers, and made Jean produce his; settled everything at the church and the *Mairie*, carried her passion so far as to lend what money was necessary for a bond signed by both of them, in which, by way of interest, the sum advanced was doubled. What stabbed her to the heart were the glasses of wine that she had to offer people in the midst of her preparations; but she had her sour vinegar, her "cousin-killer," which was so undrinkable that people were very discreet in accepting it. She decided there should be no breakfast on account of the family difficulties. Mass, and a glass of "cousin-killer" simply to drink the young couple's health. The Charles were invited, but refused, making their pretext the anxiety that was caused them by their son-in-law, Vancogne. Fouan, in his uneasiness, took to his bed, and sent word that he was ill. And, of the relations, no one came but Delhomme, who wished to be one of Françoise's witnesses, to mark the esteem which he felt for that worthy fellow, Jean. The latter on his side brought no one but his witnesses—his master (Hourdequin) and one of the farm hands. All Rognes was abroad. This marriage, arranged so cavalierly, and big with so many disputes, was pryed at from every door. At the *Mairie*,

Macqueron, puffed out with importance, exaggerated the formalities because the late mayor was present. At the church there was a painful incident—the Abbé Madeline fainted whilst he was saying Mass. He was in weak health, pining for his mountains, since he lived in the flats of Beauce; and he was heart-broken at the religious indifference of his new parishioners, and so tormented by the gossip and incessant quarrelling of the women, that he did not even dare to threaten them with Hell. They had scented out his weakness, and abused it so far even as to tyrannize over him in questions of religion. However, Cœlina, Flore, all showed an immense compassion for him when he fell on his face before the altar; they declared it was a sign of speedy death for the married pair.

It was settled that Françoise should continue to board with La Grande until the partition took place; for the girl was determined, with the obstinate strong-will which characterized her, that she would have the house. What was the good, then, of renting another for a fortnight? Jean, who was to stay on as a waggoner at the farm for a time, would simply come and seek her every evening. Their wedding-night was quite commonplace, and dreary, small sorrow as they had at being together at last. As he seized her in his arms, she fell to weeping so bitterly that she almost choked, and yet he had not hurt her; on the contrary, he had behaved with great gentleness. The worst of it was that in the midst of her sobs she replied to him that she had nothing against him, she was crying because she couldn't help it, she didn't even know why. Naturally, such a *contretemps* was not precisely calculated to put the heart into a man. For all that, he took hold of her again, and held her in his arms; it gave them no pleasure, less even than they had felt the first time, in the rick. That sort of thing, as he explained it, must be done all at once, otherwise the taste for it is lost. However, in spite of their discomfiture, the sort of odd embarrassment which had fallen over both their hearts, they were perfectly agreed, and finished the night, being unable to sleep, by talking

of the way things should go when they had the house and the land.

On the following day, Françoise demanded the partition. But La Grande was in no such hurry; to begin with, she wanted to spin out the pleasure, to drain the blood of the family by pin-pricks; then, she had found the little one and her husband too profitable—for the latter gave every evening two hours' work in payment of the rent of the room—to make her anxious to see them leave her and set up for themselves. She herself, in Françoise's name, asked for the house, half of the arable land, half of the meadow, and abandoned any claim to half the vine-yard, an acre, which she estimated as being about equal in value to the house. In sum, this demand was fair and reasonable; for an amicable settlement would have avoided the necessity of bringing in the intervention of the law, which always takes too much of the fat for itself. Buteau, who was disorganized by the interference of La Grande, compelled as he was to respect her on account of her money, would hear no more. He went off violently, fearing that he should forget his interests so far as to strike her. And Lise remained behind, red to the ears, stammering with anger.

"The house, the hussy wants the house! The good-for-nothing, who got married without so much as coming to see me! . . . Very well, aunt, tell her that the day she gets the house she can be very sure I shall be dead."

La Grande remained calm.

"Good, my girl! There's no need to have a fit. . . . You want the house, too; you've a perfect right to. We shall see."

And for the space of three days she journeyed to and fro between the two sisters, bearing from one to the other the insulting things that each said, exasperating them to such a degree that both were almost obliged to take to their beds. She was never tired of informing them how she loved them, and pointing out what gratitude her nieces owed her for having consented to undertake such a disagreeable duty. Finally, it was decided that

the land should be shared, but that the house and furniture, as well as the live-stock, should be sold judicially, since no agreement could be come to. Each of the two sisters swore *she* would buy back the house, no matter at what price, if she had to go without a shift for it.

Grosbois came, therefore, to survey the land and divide it into two lots. There was one hectare of meadow, another of vineyard, two of arable land; and it was this last, in particular, at the place called Cornailles, that Buteau, ever since his marriage, had been set on retaining, for they joined the field which he had received from his father, and made a plot of nearly three hectares, such as no other peasant in Rognes possessed. So that he was furious when he had to see Grosbois set up his elbow, and fix the land-marks. La Grande was there, superintending, as Jean had preferred to absent himself for fear of a fight. And a dispute began; for Buteau wanted the line to be drawn parallel to the Aigre valley, so that his field would still be united to his lot, whichever it should be; whereas the aunt, with the single aim of thwarting him, insisted that the division should be made perpendicularly. She carried her point, and he clenched his fists, choking with suppressed passion.

"Then, God's truth! if I get the first lot, I shall be cut in two, I shall have that on one side, and my field on the other?"

"Lord, my lad, it's your business, then, to get hold of the right lot!"

For the last month Buteau's wrath had known no cessation. To begin with, there was the loss of the girl; he was sick of baulked desire, since it was no longer possible to seize handfuls of her flesh under her petticoats, with the obstinate hope of possessing her entirely some day; and after her marriage, the notion of the other having her in his bed, and working his will on her, gave the last touch to the fever of his blood. Then, now, there was the land—the land too was taken from him to be possessed by another. He would have sooner lost a limb. The girl—it

would pass; girls are to be recovered; but the land, land which he considered as his own, which he had sworn he would never give up! He saw red, looked for means of escape, and had vague dreams of violence and murder, which nothing but his terror of the police prevented him from committing.

Finally, a day of meeting was fixed, at M. Baillehache's, where Buteau and Lise found themselves for the first time in the presence of Françoise and Jean, whom La Grande had been pleased to accompany under the pretext of preventing anything going wrong. They entered the office, all five stiff and silent. The Buteaus sat down on the right. Jean, to the left, remained standing behind Françoise, as much as to say that he had nothing to do with it, had merely come to authorize his wife. And the aunt established herself in the middle, tall and lean, casting her round eyes and her beak-like nose first on one, then on the others, with satisfaction. The two sisters had not given any sign of recognition, neither a word nor a glance; their faces were set. Only one glance was exchanged between the men, swift and gleaming, like the stroke of a knife.

"My friends," said M. Baillehache, who was unmoved by their uncompromising attitude, "before anything else we will complete the division of the land, on which you are agreed."

This time he insisted on their signing at once. The deed was all prepared, only the specification of the lots was left blank, after the names. And they were all compelled to sign before the drawing, which was carried out then incontinently, in order to save further trouble.

Françoise having drawn the number two, Lise had to take number one, and Buteau's face grew black with the rush of blood to his head.

"God's truth! God's truth!" he swore between his teeth. "Blast and damn it!"

The lawyer begged him to wait until he was outside.

"It's because it cuts our land in two over yonder on the plain," remarked Lise, without turning to her sister. "Perhaps

they would agree to an exchange. It would oblige us, and do harm to nobody."

"No!" said Françoise, drily.

La Grande made an approving motion of her head. It was unlucky to alter after the lot had been drawn. And this malicious stroke of destiny delighted her; whilst Jean had not stirred. He still stood behind his wife, so determined to keep aloof that his face expressed nothing.

"Come," went on the lawyer, "let's try and finish it, we're not here just for pleasure."

The two sisters, by a mutual agreement, had chosen him to carry out the realization of the house, furniture and live-stock. The sale was fixed by advertisement for the second Sunday of the month; it would take place in his office, and the specification set forth that the purchaser would have a right to take possession on the very day of the sale. Finally, after the sale, the lawyer would proceed to the various settlements of accounts between the co-heiresses. All that was agreed to without a discussion. But at this moment, Fouan, who was expected as guardian, was introduced by a clerk who had refused admittance to Jesus Christ, the rascal was so drunk. Although Françoise had been of age for a month, the accounts of her minority had not yet been rendered, which made things more complicated. And it was necessary to get these over in order to release the old man from his responsibility. He looked at them, each and all, with his small, peering eyes; he trembled in his growing fear of being compromised and finding himself brought into court. The lawyer read out the summary of account. They all listened, blinking their eyes, uneasy because they did not always understand, and suspicious, if a word escaped them, lest misfortune awaited them in that word.

"Have you any objections to make?" asked M. Baillehache, when he had done.

They looked alarmed. What objections? Very likely they had forgotten something, overlooked it.

"Beg pardon," declared La Grande, suddenly, "but that's not by any means all that's due to Françoise, that isn't. And my brother must have shut his eyes deliberately not to see that she's been robbed."

Fouan stammered.

"Ay? What? I've not taken a halfpenny, I swear it, before Heaven."

"I tell you that Françoise, since her sister's marriage—that's nearly five years ago—has lived in the house as a servant, and there are wages owing her."

Buteau, at this unexpected blow, leapt on his chair,. Lise, herself, choked.

"Wages! What? To a sister! I must say that would be too abominable!"

M. Baillehache had to impose silence on them; he assured them that the minor had a perfect right to claim wages if she wished.

"Yes, I wish to," said Françoise. "I want all that belongs to me."

"And all her food, then?" shouted Buteau, beside himself with anger. "It didn't go far with her, meat and bread didn't. You just feel her, she hasn't got fat on an empty stomach, the idle hussy!"

"And her linen and clothes?" went on Lise, furiously. "And washing? Why, she didn't take more than two days to soil her shift, she sweated so!"

Françoise was put out; she answered:

"If I sweated as much as that, it shows how I worked."

"Sweat dries up, it doesn't soil," added La Grande.

Once more M. Baillehache intervened. And he explained that they must make a statement—on one side wages, on the other food and keep. He took up a pen and tried to draw up this statement from their suggestions. But it was a terrible task. Françoise, supported by La Grande, made demand after demand, set a high value on her labour, enumerated all her occupations

in the house, talked of the cows, and the housekeeping, and the cleaning, and the fields, where her brother-in-law made use of her as though she were a maw. The exasperated Buteaus, on their side, exaggerated the total of their expenditure, counted the meals, lied about clothes, even demanded the pocket-money they had made her a present of on *fête* days. However, in spite of their sharpness, on a balance it was found they owed a hundred and eighty-six francs. They paused there, their hands trembling, their eyes inflamed, while they still sought for something they might deduct.

The amount was going to be accepted, when Buteau cried:

"Wait a minute! There's the doctor; when her courses were stopped. . . . He came twice. That makes six francs."

La Grande was unwilling to acquiesce in this victory of the other side, and she pressed Fouan, insisted on his remembering the days the girl had been employed on the farm, formerly, when he was living in the house. Was it five or six days, at thirty sous? Françoise shouted six, Lise five, furiously, as though they were flinging stones. And the harassed old man said first one was right, and then the other; and he struck his forehead with his two fists. Françoise carried it; the total figure was a hundred and eighty-nine francs.

"Now then, is that all this time?" asked the lawyer.

Buteau, on his chair, seemed to be crushed and annihilated by this continually growing reckoning. He struggled no longer, believing himself to be at the end of his woes. He murmured, in an anguished voice:

"If they want my shirt, I shall give it 'em."

But La Grande held her last, terrible shot in reserve—something large and very simple, which everybody had forgotten.

"Listen, please! How about the five hundred francs' indemnity for the road over yonder?"

Buteau was on his feet with a bound, his eyes starting out of his head, his mouth open. There was nothing to say; it was impossible to dispute it; he had pocketed the money, he must

restore half of it. For an instant he sought about, then, when he saw no escape, in the rising madness which made his brain throb, he rushed suddenly upon Jean.

"You dirty bugger! It's you that has killed our affection. If it wasn't for you, we should still be living together in a happy family, like friends!"

Jean, whose silence had been full of moderation, was obliged to put himself on the defensive.

"If you touch me, I'll strike."

Françoise and Lise were up instantly; each took her stand before her man, their faces distorted by the hatred which had developed by degrees, their nails extended ready to tear each other's skin. And a general skirmish, which neither La Grande nor Fouan seemed disposed to prevent, would certainly have sent caps and hair flying, had not the lawyer departed from his professional calm.

"Confound you! Will you wait till you're outside? It's preposterous that you can't come to an agreement without fighting!"

Then, as they all grew calm, and trembled, he added:

"You are agreed, aren't you? . . . Very well, I'll finish the accounts of the guardianship; we'll sign them. Then we will proceed with the sale of the house, to finish up. Get away now, and behave yourselves. Sometimes you pay dear for such stupidity."

This remark succeeded in calming them. But, as they went out, Jesus Christ, who had waited for the father, insulted the whole family, bellowing out that it was a real shame to drag a poor old man into their nasty business, no doubt merely to rob him. And, rendered sentimental from drink, he took him back, as he had brought him, on the straw of a cart that he had borrowed of a neighbour. The Buteaus went off in one direction; La Grande made Jean and Françoise take her to the *Good Husbandman*, where they paid for her black coffee. She was beaming.

"I have had a good laugh, anyhow," she concluded, as she put the rest of the sugar into her pocket.

That very day La Grande had another idea. When she got back to Rognes, she hurried off to interveiw old Father Saucisse, who, people said, was one of her old lovers. As the Buteaus had sworn they would run the house up against Françoise, if they sacrificed their skin over it, she told herself that if the old peasant bid for it, too, the others would not suspect anything perhaps, and would let it go to him; for he was their neighbour, and might naturally want to extend his domain. He agreed at once, stipulated merely for a gratuity. So that on the second Sunday of the month, at the auction, things befell as she had foreseen. Once more in Lawyer Baillehache's office, there were the Buteaus on one side, Françoise and Jean on the other, with La Grande; and there were other people—a few peasants who had come with the vague idea of buying, if it went for nothing. But in four or five bids, made in a quick voice by Lise and Françoise, the house rose to three thousand five hundred francs, which was its value. Françoise stopped at three thousand eight hundred. Thereupon Daddy Saucisse came on the scene, led up to four thousand, and then added five hundred francs. The Buteaus looked at each other in terror: it was no longer possible, the notion of all that money froze them. Lise, however, let herself be carried on to five thousand. But she was crushed when the old peasant, in a single bid, brought it up to five thousand and two. It was finished; the house was knocked down to him at five thousand two hundred francs. The Buteaus jeered; such a big sum was a good haul, so long as Françoise and her beast of a husband were beaten also.

When Lise, however, on her return to Rognes, entered once more the ancient dwelling, where she had been born, and where she had lived, she began to sob. Buteau, likewise, choked and had a stifling feeling in his throat, so much so, that he ended by relieving his feelings on her, swearing that for his part he would have stripped himself of his last hair, but those heartless

women, they never opened their purses—or their thighs—except to take something in. It was a lie: it was he who had stopped her, and they disputed. Ah! that poor old patriarchal house of the Fouans, built three centuries ago by an ancestor, and to-day shaky and worm-eaten, patched and mended on every side, with its face falling over from the blasts of those mighty winds of La Beauce. To think how the family had dwelt in it for three hundred years, had finished by loving and cherishing it as though it were actually a relic, so that it counted for much in the inheritance. With a blow, Buteau knocked Lise over, but she sprang up and made such a rush at him that she almost broke his leg.

On the evening of the next day, it was another story; the thunderclap burst on them. Old Father Saucisse, having gone in the morning to make the prescribed declaration, Rognes knew at midday that he had bought the house on Françoise's behalf, authorized by Jean; and not only the house but the furniture also, and Gédeon and La Coliche. At the Buteaus there was such a wailing of anguish and distress that it was as though the lightning had struck them. The man, the woman, grovelled on the floor, wept and howled in a savage despair at being proved the weaker—at having been tricked by that bit of a hussy. What maddened them beyond all was to know that the village laughed at them—at their singular lack of acuteness. God's truth! they asked, would they be kicked out like that, turned away in a minute from their own door? Ah, would they, though? People should see.

When La Grande arrived the same evening to make, on Françoise's behalf, a friendly arrangement with Buteau as to the date on which he proposed to move, he drove her out of doors, losing all prudence, answering her with one solitary word:

"*Merde!*"

She went off delighted; she merely cried to him that the bailiff would be sent. On the morrow, in effect, Vimeux, looking pale and anxious, a more pitiable object than ever, came

up the road and knocked cautiously, while the gossips of the neighbouring houses looked on. There was no answer; he was obliged to knock louder: ventured to give a call, explaining that it was for a notice of eviction. Then the window of the granary was thrown open, and a voice bellowed the word—the same solitary word.

"*Merde!*"

And a pot full of the article in question was emptied on him. Soaked from head to foot, Vimeux had to carry back his summons. Rognes is holding its sides yet.

Forthwith, La Grande took Jean over to Châteaudun to see the counsel. The latter explained to them that there must be a lapse of at least five days before they could procure an eviction: the matter must be brought before the court, the order made by the president, this order conveyed to the chief clerk, and then the eviction, in which the bailiff could obtain, if it were needful, the assistance of the police. La Grande harangued until she had gained a day, and when she was back at Rognes, it being Tuesday, she announced everywhere that on the Saturday evening the Buteaus would be turned into the street like thieves at the bayonet's end, if they had not left the house with good grace before.

When the news was retailed to Buteau he gave a ferociously threatening gesture. He swore to everyone who would listen that the soldiers would have to pull down the walls before they would get him out. And through the country-side people were uncertain whether he was feigning to be mad or had really become so, his passion had reached such an extravagant point. He tore over the roads, standing in the front of his cart, with his horse going at a gallop, without deigning to answer, or calling to people to get out of the way. He was even to be seen at nights, sometimes on one side, sometimes on another, returning from no one knew where—from the devil most likely. A man who had come near him had got a great cut from his whip. He spread terror round him, the village was soon in a perpetual

state of alertness. One morning they discovered that he had barricaded himself indoors, and horrible cries were heard from behind the closed doors, howls which people seemed to recognize as the voices of Lise and her two children. The neighbours were in a state of consternation; they took counsel together, and one old peasant volunteered to put a ladder up against the window and go up and look. But the window opened, Buteau hurled down the ladder and the old man with it; he almost broke his legs. Wasn't a man to be free in his own house? He shook his fists at them; bellowed out that he would be the death of them all if they bothered him any more. The worst was that Lise appeared as well, with the two brats, and flung insults at them, accusing them of poking their noses into other people's concerns. They did not dare interfere again, only their uneasiness increased with each fresh disturbance. People came and listened, shuddering to the horrors that could be heard in the street. The clever ones believed that he had some plan. Others vowed that he had gone off his head, and that it would finish up with some tragedy. No one was ever certain which it was.

On Friday, the eve of the day on which the eviction was expected, there was a scene which particularly affected people. Buteau, having met his father near the church, started weeping like a calf, and he fell on his knees before him on the ground and asked his pardon for his bad behaviour of old. Perhaps it was that which had brought him misfortune. He implored him to return and live with them, appearing to believe that only this return would bring back the luck. Fouan, wearied by his cries, and astounded at his apparent repentance, promised him to accept one day, when all the family disagreements were at an end.

At last the Saturday arrived. Buteau's agitation had gone on growing; from morning to night he was harnessing and unharnessing his horse without any motive, and people fled from before the mad career of his cart; these drives were startling in their uselessness. On Saturday, by eight o'clock, he had harnessed his horse once more, but he did not go out; planted

himself before his door, and called to the neighbours who passed, with jeers and sobs, bellowing out his story in crude terms. What? It was a famous thing, anyhow, to be plucked by a little slut who had been one's light-o'-love for five years! Yes, she was a whore! and his wife too! They were two famous whores, the two sisters; they came to blows as to which should go with him first! He reiterated this lie, with disgusting details, to revenge himself. Lise came out, and a bitter quarrel began; he beat her before everybody, and sent her off subdued and relieved; while he, too, was pleased at having given her such a drubbing. And he remained outside his door, watching for the approach of the law, which he mocked and insulted. Was it going to be a bloody laughing-stock, the law? He no longer expected it—was triumphant.

It was not till four o'clock that Vimeux appeared with two gendarmes. Buteau turned white; he hastily shut the door of the yard. Probably he had never believed that they would go to this extreme. Dead silence fell upon the house. Vimeux, growing insolent this time, beneath the protection of his armed escort, knocked with both fists. There was no answer. The gendarmes had to intervene; they assaulted the old door with blows of their staves. Quite a procession of men, women, and children had followed them. All Rognes was there, in expectation of the promised siege. But, suddenly the door was thrown open again, and they discovered Buteau, standing in the front of his cart, lashing his horse. He came out at a gallop and made straight for the crowd. He shouted, in the midst of their cries of alarm:

"I'm going to drown myself, I'm going to drown myself!"

It was all up, he talked of ending it, flinging himself into the Aigre, cart and horse and all.

"Out of the way with you! I'm going to drown myself!"

The curious had scattered in alarm before the blows of his whip, and the furious pace of the cart. But, as he drove it with a crash of wheels down the incline, some men ran to stop him.

The damned thick-head was quite capable of taking such a dip, just to annoy people! They caught him; they were obliged to fight, to spring at his horse's head and climb into the cart. When they had brought him back, he was no longer inclined to speech; with clenched teeth and his whole body rigid, he let destiny fulfil itself with a dumb protest of impotent wrath. At that moment La Grande brought round Françoise and Jean to take possession of the house. And Buteau contented himself with glancing at them with that black glance with which he watched now for the close of his misfortunes. It was Lise's turn now to shriek and struggle like a mad woman. The gendarmes were there, repeatedly telling her to pack up her things and be off. There was nothing to do but obey, since her man was coward enough not to protect her and knock them down. With her arms akimbo she fell upon him:

"You bloody coward, to let them turn us out into the street! Haven't you any heart in you, ay? Why don't you strike the blackguards? Go on, you coward! Coward! You're not a man!"

She shouted it into his face, exasperated by his indifference; and he finished by shoving her away so roughly that she screamed. But he did not depart from his silence, he only looked at her with his black look.

"Now, mother, make haste!" said Vimeux, triumphantly. "We shall stay here till you've given the keys to the new proprietors."

After that, Lise began to clear out in a paroxysm of rage. During the last three days, Buteau and she had already taken a good many of their belongings, tools and heavy utensils, to their neighbour, La Frimat; and it appeared that, after all, they must have expected the eviction, for they had made an agreement with the old woman, who, in order to give them time to look about them, was to let them her superfluous accommodation, reserving only the room of her paralysed husband. Since the furniture had been sold with the house, and the animals also,

it only remained for Lise to remove her linen and bedding and some other trifling objects. Everything was tossed out of the door and windows into the middle of the yard, while the two children cried as though they thought their last hour had come; Laure was hanging on to her mother's petticoats, Jules lying flat, right in the midst of the bustle. As Buteau did not so much as lend a hand, the gendarmes, who were worthy fellows, started to load the cart with the packages. But there was a fresh *contretemps* when Lise caught sight of Françoise and Jean, who were waiting behind La Grande. She rushed forward, gave vent to the concentrated flood of her hatred.

"Ah, bitch! so you've come with your blackguard, to look on. . . . Very well! you see our trouble—it's as though you were sucking our heart's blood! Thief! thief! thief!"

The word made her choke; she came back to cast it at her sister every time she brought a fresh packet into the yard. The latter made no answer; she was very pale, her lips compressed, her eyes flaming; and she made a pretence of being engrossed in her injurious inspection, following each object with her eyes, to make sure that nothing of hers was removed. At that moment she recognized a kitchen stool, which had been included in the sale.

"That's mine," she said, in a harsh voice.

"Yours? Well, go and fetch it, then!" replied the other, and she sent the stool to take a bath in the pond.

The house was ready. Buteau took the horse by the bridle, Lise picked up her two children, her two last parcels, Jules on her right arm, Laure on her left. Then, as she finally left the old dwelling, she came up to Françoise and spat in her face.

"There, that's for you!"

Quickly her sister spat too.

"And that's for you!"

And Lise and Françoise, after this farewell of venomous hatred, wiped their faces slowly, without removing their eyes from each other. They were estranged for all time; there was

no other bond between them save the revolted hostility of their common blood.

At last Buteau, opening his mouth again, shouted out the departing word, with a gesture of menace against the house:

"Goodbye, for the present,—we shall come back."

La Grande followed them, to see the end, having moreover made up her mind, now that these two were brought low, to turn against the others, who had deserted her so promptly, and whom already she found over-fortunate. For a long time, groups stood there and conversed in undertones. Françoise and Jean had entered the empty house.

Just as the Buteaus, on their side, were disembarking their chattels at La Frimat's, they were astounded to see old Father Fouan appear, and ask, choking and breathless, casting a glance behind him, as though some malefactor were pursuing him:

"Have you a corner for me here? I've come to sleep."

It was in a regular fright that he had hurried off in flight from the Castle. He never woke at night without seeing Slutty, in her shift, promenading her meagre nakedness, like a boy's, in his room, in search of the papers which he had finally hidden out of doors, at the bottom of a hole in a rock, which he had stopped up with earth. It was Jesus Christ who sent the young baggage, on account of her deftness and subtilty; with her bare feet, she could glide everywhere, between the chairs, under the bed, like a snake; and she was keen on this hunt, convinced that the old man concealed the papers upon him when he dressed, and furious that she could not discover where he put them before going to bed. For there was certainly nothing in the bed; she thrust in her skinny arm, and explored it with her adroit hand whose touch was hardly perceptible to her grand-father. But to-day, after breakfast, he had been seized with faintness, turned giddy and tumbled down by the table. When he came to himself, so dazed still that he did not open his eyes, he found himself on the floor in the same place, and was horrified to find that Jesus Christ and Slutty were undressing him. Instead of

bringing him help the wretches had only one thought—to profit quickly by the occasion, to search him. The girl, in especial, brought a vindictive brutality to the task, not making use of any more gentleness, dragging off his shirt, his breeches, and actually peering into his body, into every corner, to make sure that he hadn't buried his nest-egg there! She turned him over with both hands, pulled his limbs apart, and turned him out like an old, empty pocket. Nothing! Where was his hoard, then? Would they cut him open to look inside? Such a terror of being murdered, if he stirred, had seized him that he continued to feign unconsciousness, his eyes closed, his legs and arms limp. Only when at last they left him, and he was free, he escaped, fully determined not to sleep at the Castle.

"Well, have you a corner for me?" he asked again.

Buteau seemed to cheer up at his father's unexpected return. It was money coming back to him.

"Why, of course, old man! We'll pack in a little tighter! It will bring us luck. . . . Ah, s'help me! I'd be a rich man if it wasn't that I had too much heart."

Françoise and Jean had slowly entered the house. Night was falling; a last, sad gleam illuminated the silent rooms. It was all very old, that ancestral thatch which had braved the labour and wretchedness of three centuries. It was as though something solemn depended there, as in the darkness of old village churches. The doors had been left open, a thunderstorm seemed to have beaten upon the beams; chairs were overturned on the floor, in confusion, in the midst of the disorder of the move. It might have been a house of death.

And Françoise made a tour of it, with little steps, gazed everywhere. Confused sensations, vague memories awoke in her. In that corner she had played as a child; in the kitchen, hard by the table, her father had died. In the bedroom, beside the bedstead, stripped of its mattress, she was reminded of Lise and Buteau, of the nights when they embraced so violently that she could hear them panting through the partition wall. Would they

now be able to torture her any more? She was sensible that Buteau's presence was there persistently. Here he had seized her one evening and she had bitten him. There, too; and again, there! In every corner she was confronted with ideas which filled her with trouble.

Then, as Françoise returned, she was surprised to perceive Jean. What was he doing in their house, that strange man? He wore an air of embarrassment, he seemed to be there on a visit, afraid to touch anything. A desolate sensation of loneliness overwhelmed her, she was in despair because she had not more joy in her victory. She had meant to enter there with a shout of gladness, triumphant behind her sister's back. And the house gave her no more pleasure, her heart was beset with trouble. Perhaps it was that melancholy close of day. She and her man finished by being left in the black night, wandering still from one room to another, without even having had the courage to light a candle.

But a noise called them back to the kitchen, and they were cheered to recognise Gédeon, who had come in, faithful to his habit, and was exploring the cupboard, which had been left open. Old Coliche lowed outside, at the end of the shed.

Then Jean took Françoise in his arms and kissed her gently, as though he would say that all the same they would be happy.

PART FIVE

CHAPTER I

BEFORE the winter ploughing began, La Beauce, as far as the eye could reach, stretched beneath the pale September sky, wrapped in a coverlet of manure. From morn to eve, its slow cartage was carried on along the country roads, overflowing waggons of old, reeking straw, which sent out a dense steam as though they were bearing heat to the earth. All around, the fields were dotted with little heaps—an undulating and rising sea made of the litter from shed and stable; whilst in certain fields these heaps had been spread out, and their wide expanse shaded the soil from afar with a dark stain. It was the germ of future spring which filtered through this fermentation of liquid manure; it was decaying matter returning to the common womb; it was death on its way to make new life. And, from one end to the other of the vast plain, a stench floated up, the potent odour of dung, which was the nursing-mother of man's daily bread.

One afternoon, Jean was taking down a large cartful of manure to his field at Cornailles. For the last month he and Françoise had been settled down, and their existence had fallen into the active and monotonous routine of country life. As he arrived, he caught sight of Buteau in the adjoining field, a prong in his hands, busy spreading out the heaps which had been set down there the week before. The two men exchanged oblique glances. They often met like this, found themselves compelled to work side by side, since they were neighbours; and Buteau suffered especially at this, for Françoise's share being taken from his three hectares left a piece on the right and a piece on the left, and this compelled him perpetually to be going out of his way. They never exchanged a word. It was likely that, on the day

when a quarrel should spring up, there would be murder done.

Jean, however, began to unload the manure from his cart. Mounted upon it, he threw it out with a prong, and was up to his waist, when Hourdequin passed along the road, having been on his round since noon. The farmer had retained a kindly recollection of his servant. He stopped and conversed; he looked aged, his face was devastated with cares—those of the farm, and others as well.

"Jean, why haven't you tried phosphates, now?"

And, without waiting for a reply, he went on talking for some time, as though to escape from himself. Those manures and fertilizers—the gist of the secret of proper farming lay there. As for him, he had tried everything; he had just gone through that period of crisis, that mad manure-fever which sometimes possesses farmers. His experiments had succeeded each other—grass, leaves, the dregs of the vintage, colza and rape cakes; then he had tried crushed bones, flesh cooked and ground down, blood that had dried up and was reduced to powder; and he was vexed that he was unable to try liquid blood, there being no slaughter-house in his neighbourhood. Now he was making use of the refuse of the roads, the sweepings of the ditches, ashes and cinders from the furnaces, and particularly of waste wool which he had procured by purchasing the sweepings of a draper's store at Châteaudun. His principal was that all which comes from the earth is good to give back again to the earth. He had erected huge dust-holes at the back of the farm in which he stored the filth of the whole country-side: whatever the shovel chanced to pick up—carrion and rotting matter from the side of milestones or from stagnant waters. It was a gold mine.

"With phosphates," he went on, "I've sometimes got good results."

"They swindle one so!" answered Jean.

"Oh, of course, if you buy from the chance travellers who do the small country district business. At every bargain you want an experienced chemist who will undertake to analyse these

chemical manures. It's so difficult to obtain them quite pure of any adulteration. The future is assuredly with them, but before the future comes we shall all be dead. One must have the courage to suffer for other people."

The stench of the manure Jean was stirring had slightly cheered him. He loved it, breathed it in with an honest male delight, as if it had been actually the odour of the earth's coition.

"No doubt," he continued, after a silence, "there's still nothing worth the farm dung-heap. Only, there's never enough of it. And, then, people ruin it; they don't know how to prepare it or to use it. Look there! I can see that's been burnt by the sun. You don't keep it under cover."

And he fell out with their bondage to custom, when Jean admitted that he had retained the Buteaus' old hole in front of the shed. He, himself, for many years, had been accustomed to thatch the various heaps in his place with layers of earth and turf. He had also started a series of gutters to run into the reservoir the slops from the house, the human and animal urine, all the drains of the farm; and twice a week the manure heap was watered with this liquor from a pump. Finally, he had taken to using the material to be obtained from the privies, as something particularly valuable.

"Faith, yes! It's too foolish to waste anything the Almighty sends us. For a long time I was like the peasants, I had fastidious notions on the matter. But old Mother Gaga has converted me. You know her, Mother Gaga, your neighbour? Well, she is the only one who is right; the cabbage over which she has emptied her pot is the king of cabbages, both for size and flavour. There's no disputing it; everything is due to that."

Jean started laughing; he leapt out of his cart and began to spread out his manure in little heaps. Hourdequin followed him, in the midst of the warm steam which enveloped both of them.

"Only to think that the sewage of Paris alone might fertilize thirty thousand hectares! The calculation has been made. And it's wasted; they barely use an infinitesimal part of it in a pul-

verized form. Ah! thirty thousand hectares! Can't you see it here, can't you see La Beauce covered with it, and the wheat growing fine? "

With a large gesture he embraced the landscape—vast, flat La Beauce. And to him, in his passion, there came a vision of Paris, the whole of Paris opening the sluice of her sewers for the fertilizing flood of human manure. Gutters full of it spread everywhere, broad ponds of it gathered on each ploughed field, the sea of excrement lay beneath the generous sunshine, and the broad breezes excited the odour of it. It was the great city rendering to the fields the life which it had received from them. Slowly the sun absorbed that fecundity, and from the gorged and fattened earth the white corn grew and burgeoned in giant harvests.

" Perhaps we should want a boat, then! " said Jean, whom this new notion of the plains' submersion in sewage both amused and disgusted.

But at that moment a voice made him turn his head. He was surprised to recognise Lise standing up in her cart, which she had stopped at the road-side, while she shouted to Buteau with all her strength:

" I say, I'm going to Cloyes to fetch Monsieur Finet. The father has fallen down senseless in his room. I think he's dying. Just go back and see! "

And, without even waiting for his answer, she whipped up the horse and was off again, her figure jogging and growing smaller along the perfectly straight road.

Buteau, without hurry, finished spreading out his last heaps. He was growling. The father ill, that would be a nuisance! Perhaps, after all, it was only a plant, just a way of getting himself coddled. Then a conviction that it must be serious, after all, since his wife had taken upon herself the expense of a doctor, decided him to put on his coat.

" It weighs heavy on him—his dung-heap! " murmured Hourdequin, interested in the manuring of the adjoining field. " Who

stints the soil, the soil stints him. . . . And a worthless scamp he is, and one you had better beware of since your rows with him. How can you expect it to go right when there's such a mass of bitches and blackguards on the earth? By Gad! it's had enough of us!" He went off in the direction of La Borderie, conquered again by his gloom, at the same moment that Buteau started back at a laggard pace for Rognes. And Jean, being left alone, finished his task, depositing every ten yards forkfuls of manure, which gave out increasing ammoniacal fumes. Other heaps steamed in the distance, and hid the horizon with a fine, blueish mist. All Beauce would be kept warm and odorous with it until the frosts came.

The Buteaus were still with La Frimat, where they occupied the whole house, with the exception of the ground floor back, which she retained for herself and her paralysed man. They were too closely packed, they were especially regretful not to have any longer a kitchen-garden, for naturally she had kept hers, the little bit which was sufficient to keep, and keep in comfort, the sick man. This would have driven them to move, in quest of a larger residence, had they not discovered that their proximity irritated Françoise. Nothing but a partition wall separated the two properties. And they made a point of saying very loudly, so as to be overheard, that they were encamped there, that they would be sure to return home next door at an early date. So it would be useless, wouldn't it, to go to the trouble of a new move? Why and how would they return? They did not explain that, and it was this assurance, this idiotic certainty based on unknown circumstances, which put Françoise beside herself; spoiling her pleasure in being the house-mistress without mentioning that her sister Lise would sometimes place a ladder against the wall in order to shout disagreeable things to her. Since the final settlement of accounts with M. Baillehache she affected to have been swindled, and there was no end to the abominable charges which were hurled from one yard to the other.

When at last Buteau arrived he found old Father Fouan

stretched on his bed in the corner which he occupied behind the kitchen, beneath the granary stairs; the two children were watching him, Jules, who was already eight years old, and Laure, who was three. They were playing on the floor, making rivers by emptying the old man's ewer.

"Well, what's up?" asked Buteau, standing over the bed.

Fouan had recovered consciousness. His large opened eyes revolved slowly with a fixed gaze; but he did not stir his head, he seemed petrified.

"Look here, father, no bother now—we've too much to do. You mustn't kick to-day."

And seeing that Laure and Jules had just broken the ewer, he gave them a cuff apiece, which made them howl. The old man had not shut his eyes, he was still watching with his enlarged and fixed pupil. Well, there seemed nothing to do since he wasn't any livelier than that! One must wait and see what the doctor said. He was sorry that he had left the field; he started cutting some wood outside the door, just to occupy himself.

Lise, however, almost immediately returned with M. Finet, who made a lengthy examination of the sick man, whilst she and her man waited with anxious air. The old man's death would have been a relief to them, if the illness had killed him at once; but, as it happened, it might last a long time, and perhaps cost a great deal; and if he should die before they had got his nest-egg, Fanny and Jesus Christ would be sure to come and bother them.

The doctor's silence increased their trouble. When he came and sat down in the kitchen to write a prescription, they forced themselves to put him some questions.

"Well, it's something serious, then? . . . Likely to last a week, eh? Lord help us, that's long! What's that you're writing there for him?"

M. Finet made no answer; he was accustomed to such questions from the peasants, who are disorganized by sickness, and had adopted the wise course of treating them like cattle, and

avoiding conversation with them. He had a large experience of ordinary cases, and he generally pulled them through better than a man of greater knowledge might have done. But the mediocrity to which he accused them of having reduced him made him harsh to them, and that increased their respect of him, in spite of their constant doubts as to the efficacy of his potions. Would they do as much good as they cost money?

"Well," Buteau resumed, alarmed at the page of writing, "do you think, after all that, he'll get better?"

The doctor contented himself with a shrug of his shoulders. He had returned to the invalid, was interested, surprised to detect a certain amount of fever, in a light case of cerebral congestion. With his eyes on his watch, he recounted the beatings of the pulse, not even trying to extract any sign from the old man, who watched him with his dazed air. And when he went away he said simply:

"It will be a matter of three weeks. I'll call again to-morrow. Don't be surprised if he wanders in his wits to-night!"

Three weeks! The Buteaus had no ears for anything but that, they stood in consternation. The money it meant—if there was to be a like lot of drugs every evening! The worst of it was that Buteau had, in his turn, to jump into the cart and drive in to the chemist at Cloyes. It was a Saturday; La Frimat, when she came back from selling her vegetables, found Lise alone, and so disconsolate that she was simply stamping around and doing nothing; and the old woman also was in despair when she learnt what had happened; she never had any luck, she could at least have taken advantage of the doctor being there to have her old man looked at, gratuitously, if it had happened any other day. The news had already spread through Rognes, for they saw Slutty, the impudent creature, running round; and she declined to leave until she had touched her grand-father's hand; she returned to tell Jesus Christ that he was certainly not dead. Immediately after this young baggage, La Grande appeared, evidently sent by Fanny; she planted herself in front of her brother's bed,

and formed her opinion from the clearness of the eyes, as though he had been an eel from the Aigre. Then she went off, wrinkling up her nose, looking as though she regretted that it was not for this time. After that the family took no further trouble. Why do anything, since there were long odds on his getting over it?

Until midnight the house was in a bustle. Buteau had come back in an atrocious temper. There were plasters for the legs, a draught to be taken every hour, a purge, in case of improvement, on the following morning. La Frimat was willing to help; but at ten o'clock she got drowsy, and, not being particularly interested, went to bed. Buteau, who wanted to do the same, scolded Lise. What were they up to there? It was sure enough that just looking at the old man didn't help him. He was wandering now, talking aloud of things which had hardly any connection; he must imagine himself in the fields, where he was hard at work, just as in the distant days of his prime. And Lise, rendered uncomfortable by these old stories, murmured in a low voice—as though the father were already buried, and had come back—was about to follow her husband, who was undressing, when she thought of folding the sick man's garments, which were lying on a chair. She shook them carefully, after having searched the pockets at some length; she only found in them a blunt penknife and some string. Next, as she was laying them in the cupboard, she perceived, right in the middle of a shelf, before her very eyes, a small packet of papers. It made her heart palpitate. The nest-egg! the nest-egg sought so assiduously for a month, searched for in such extraordinary places, was revealed there openly beneath her hand. No doubt the old man was going to change its hiding-place when the attack had seized him.

"Buteau! Buteau!" she called, in a voice so strenuous that he rushed in in his shirt, thinking that his father was passing. He also seemed stifled for a moment. Then a mad joy seized both of them; they took each other by the hands, they leapt one before the other like goats, forgetful of the sick man, who, with his eyes

now closed, his head glued to the pillow, unravelled unceasingly the broken threads of his delirium. He was ploughing.

"Up there, you beast, won't you? . . . That's not soft, it's flint, s'help me! . . . Arms broken—must buy new ones. . . . Whoa! you bugger."

"Hush!" whispered Lise, and she turned round trembling.

"Oh, yes," replied Buteau, "what does he know? Don't you see he's talking nonsense?"

They sat down near the bed, their legs aching, the shock of their joy had been so potent.

"Anyhow," she went on, "they can't accuse us of having searched him, for the Lord is my witness, I hadn't a thought about it—his money. It jumped into my hand. . . . Let's look!"

He was already undoing the papers, he reckoned it up aloud.

"Two hundred and thirty, and seventy, three hundred all told. It's just that, I calculated it right from the quarter, the fifteen five-franc pieces I saw the other day at the tax collector's. It's five per cent. Well! Ain't it odd that such rubbishy bits of paper should be money too, just as good as the real sort?"

But Lise imposed silence on him once more, alarmed by a sudden chuckle from the old man, who, perhaps, had gone back to the great harvest in the time of Charles X., when they had not been able to garner everything for lack of room.

"Heaps and heaps! It's killing, such heaps! Lord, Lord! When it comes, it comes."

And his stifled laugh was like the sound of a rattle; his delight must have been within, for no sign of it appeared on his impassive face.

"It's just childishness he's got in his head," said Buteau, shrugging his shoulders.

"What now?" Lise whispered presently, "hadn't we better put them back?"

But, with a decisive gesture, he refused.

"Oh yes! Put them back! He'll look for them, make a

row—we should have a pretty bother with the rest of the family —the beasts! "

She interrupted him for a third time, dismayed to hear the father weeping. Misery, an immense despair, sobs which seemed to come from his whole life: and they did not know any cause, for he merely repeated, in a voice which kept growing more hollow:

" Done for . . . done for . . . done for."

" And do you think," Buteau went on, fiercely, " that I'm going to leave his papers with that old man, whose wits are gone? For him to tear them up or burn them—ah, no fear! "

" Yes, that's true enough," she murmured.

" There, that's enough about it, come to bed! If he asks for them I'll answer him, I'll make it my business. And the others had better leave me alone."

They went to bed, after having hidden the papers in their turn, beneath the marble top of an old chest of drawers, which seemed to them safer than to deposit them in a drawer and turn the lock. The father, left alone, without a candle for fear of fire, continued to sob and chatter in delirium all night.

On the following day M. Finet found him calmer, better than he had hoped. Ah! those old plough-horses, they had souls riveted to their bodies! The fever which he had feared seemed to be gone. He prescribed iron and quinine—rich folks' drugs, whose dearness again threw the household into consternation. And as he departed he had an encounter with La Frimat, who had been watching for him.

" But, my good woman, I've told you already that your man and this mile-stone—they're much the same. How the devil am I to put life into a stone? You know how it will end, don't you? And the sooner the better for him and for you."

He whipped up his horse; she dropped into a sitting position on the mile-stone, and burst into tears. No doubt it was a long time already to have looked after her man, twelve years. And her strength diminished with the approach of age; she trembled at

the thought that soon she might be no longer able to cultivate her little bit of ground. But no matter. It made her heart sick to think of losing the old paralytic, who had come to seem like her child, whom she carried, dressed, pampered with dainties. The good arm, which he could still use, was becoming affected also, so that, nowadays, it was she who had to put the pipe into his mouth.

At the end of a week M. Finet was astonished to see Fouan up and about, weak but set upon walking, because, as he said, what hinders you from dying is the will not to die. And Buteau jeered behind the doctor's back, for he had suppressed the remedies after the second batch, declaring that the surest way was to let the disease wear itself out. However, on market-day Lise had been weak enough to bring back a draught which had been prescribed the day before; and when the doctor came on Monday for the last time, Buteau told him how the old man had almost relapsed.

"I don't know what they shoved into your bottle, but it made him bloody bad."

That evening Fouan made up his mind to speak. Ever since he had been up, he had wandered through the house with an anxious air, an empty head, with no more recollection of where he could have hidden his papers. He groped and searched everywhere, made despairing efforts of memory. Then a vague recollection came to him; perhaps he had not hidden them? Perhaps they had been left there, on the shelf? What then, if he was mistaken, if no one had taken them, was he to give the alarm himself, to avow the existence of this money, hoarded at first so laboriously, and then dissimulated with so much cunning? For two days more he struggled, torn apart by his anger at this sudden disappearance, and the necessity, which he felt, to keep his mouth shut. The facts, however, acquired more precision; he remembered that on the morning of his attack he had laid the packet in that place, intending to drop it through a hole in the beam on the ceiling, which he had discovered from his bed as

he lay with his eyes looking upwards. And, despoiled and tortured, he came out with everything.

They had taken their evening soup. Lise was putting away the plates, and Buteau, in a cheery humour—he had been following the father with his eyes ever since the day on which he got about—was expecting the affair. He balanced himself on his chair, and told himself that it was coming now, he saw that he was so wretched and excited. In effect, the old man, whose unsteady legs tottered as he obstinately walked about the room, came to a sudden halt before him:

"The papers?" he asked, in a hoarse, stifled voice.

Buteau blinked his eyes, with an air of being profoundly surprised, as though he did not understand.

"Eh? What's that you say? The papers—what papers?"

"My money!" growled the old man, drawing himself up, tall and fierce.

"Your money? You've got money, then, now, have you? You swore so hard that we had cost too much, that you hadn't a sou. . . . Ah, you're damned cunning—you've got money!"

He was still balancing himself; he sneered, greatly amused, triumphing in his old acuteness, for he was the first who had scented the nest-egg.

Fouan trembled in every limb.

"Give it me back!"

"Give it you back? Have I got it? Do I even know where your money is?"

"You've robbed me. Give it me back! or, by God, I'll force you to!"

And, in spite of his age, he took him by the shoulders and shook him. But the son rose then, and caught hold of him in his turn, without doing him any violence, merely in order to shout fiercely in his face:

"Yes, I've got it, and I'll keep it I'll keep it; do you understand, you old fool, with your softening brain? and I tell you straight, it was time to take them from you, those papers—you

were going to tear them up. Isn't that so, Lise; he was tearing them up? "

"Ay, as sure as I'm alive! When folk don't know what they're doing. . . ."

Fouan was seized with consternation at this story. Was he mad then, that he could remember nothing? If he had wanted to destroy the papers, like a boy playing with pictures, it must be because he was beside himself and was fit to kill. His heart was broken: he had neither courage nor strength. He stammered out, weeping:

"I tell you, give them me back! "

"No! "

"Give them me back, now I'm better! "

"No, no! So that you may wipe yourself or light your pipe with them? No, thanks! "

And from that time the Buteaus refused obstinately to part with the bonds. They talked of it openly; moreover, related quite a romance, how they had arrived just in time to rescue them from the sick man's hands, at the very moment he was destroying them. One evening they even showed La Frimat the beginning of the tear. Who could find fault with them for preventing such a misfortune: money torn in pieces, lost to everybody? People approved them openly, even though at heart they believed them to be lying. Jesus Christ, in particular, was in a fury: to think that this nest-egg, which he had never been able to find, had been ferreted out at the first attempt by the others! And he had had it in his hand one day, and had been fool enough to respect it! True! it wasn't worth the disagreeableness of passing for a rogue. So he swore he would demand an account from his brother when the father died. Fanny, likewise, said there would have to be a reckoning. But the Buteaus made no objection, of course, so long as the old man did not recover his money and dispose of it.

Fouan, on his side, roamed from house to house and told the story everywhere. As soon as he could button-hole a passer-by,

he fell to bewailing his miserable lot. And it was so, that one morning he came into the adjoining yard to see his niece. Françoise was there helping Jean to load a cart of manure. Whilst he stood in the hole and threw it up with his prong, she was on the top to receive the bundles and stamp them down with her heels, so that it would hold more.

Standing before them, leaning on his stick, the old man began his lamentation.

"Ay! it's sickening, anyhow, my money that they've taken and won't give me back! What would you do, now!"

Françoise let him repeat the question three times. She was greatly annoyed at his coming thus to talk with them; she received him coldly, desirous of avoiding any pretext for a quarrel with the Buteaus.

"You know, uncle," she answered at last, "it's no business of ours; we are too glad to be out of it, that hell!"

And, turning her back, she continued to tread the straw down in the cart, up to her thighs in manure, nearly covered in it, when her man threw up his prongfuls one after the other. Then she disappeared in the midst of the hot steam, satisfied and at her ease in the reek from the hole as it was disturbed.

"For I'm not mad, that's plain, am I?" pursued Fouan, without seeming to hear her. "They ought to give me back my money. Now, you—do you think me capable of destroying it?"

Neither Françoise nor Jean breathed a word.

"One would have to be mad, ay? And I'm not mad. . . . You could bear witness to that, you two."

Suddenly she stood up, upon the loaded cart; and she looked very tall, strong and healthy, as though she had grown up there and that odour of fertility issued from her. With her hands on her haunches, her full breast, she was a real woman now.

"Ah, no, no, uncle! That's enough! I told you not to mix us up in all this nasty business. And look here, while we are on the subject, it would be just as well, perhaps, if you didn't come to see us."

"Do you mean that you send me off?" asked the old man tremulously.

Jean thought it incumbent on him to intervene.

"No! Only we don't want a row. We should be at loggerheads for three days, if they were to see you here. Everyone likes to be peaceable, don't they?"

Fouan remained motionless, looking first at one and then at the other with his poor, pale eyes. Then he went away.

"Good! If I need help, I must go somewhere else than to you."

And they let him go with an uneasy feeling in their hearts, for they were not yet bad-natured; but what could they do? It would have in nowise helped him, and it would have spoilt their appetite and their sleep. Whilst her man went to fetch his whip, she carefully, with a rake, collected the dung which had fallen, and threw it back into the cart.

The next day, a violent scene occurred between Fouan and Buteau. Each day, indeed, the argument over the bonds was started afresh, the one repeating his eternal: Give them me back! with the obstinacy of a fixed idea; the other refusing with a: Hold your bloody row! which never varied. But little by little the situation grew worse, especially since the old man had taken to hunt for a likely place for his son to have concealed the nest-egg. It was his turn to search the whole house, to sound the wood-work of the cupboards, to tap the walls and see if they sounded hollow. His eyes wandered constantly from one corner to another with a solitary preoccupation; and as soon as he was alone he sent away the children and betook himself to his search, with the eager passion of a young lout who leaps upon the servant-maid as soon as his parents' backs are turned. Now, to-day, when Buteau entered unexpectedly, he found Fouan on the floor, stretched at full length on his belly, with his nose under the chest of drawers, trying to discover if there was no secret there. It threw him into a passion, for the father was getting warm;

what he looked for beneath was above, hidden, and, as it were, sealed by the heavy weight of marble.

"You damned old crank! What are you crawling after? Will you get up?"

He dragged him by his legs, and set him on his feet with a cuff.

"There! Have you finished poking your eyes into all the holes? I've had enough of it, feeling the house is probed in every chink."

Fouan, annoyed at being surprised, looked at him. He was carried away by a sudden access of anger, and repeated:

"Give me them back!"

"Hold your bloody row!" bellowed Buteau into his face.

"Then I shall go; I'm too wretched here."

"That's right, get out of it, and good luck to you! And if you come back—God's truth, it will show you've no heart!"

He caught hold of his arm, and flung him outside.

CHAPTER II

Fouan descended the hill. His anger had suddenly calmed down. He halted at the bottom, on the road, dazed at finding himself out of doors without knowing whither to go. Three o'clock struck from the church; a damp wind chilled the gray, autumnal afternoon, and he shivered, for he had not even put on his hat, the thing had befallen so quickly. Luckily he had his stick. For a moment he started up again towards Cloyes; then he asked himself where he was going in that direction, and he returned to Rognes at his wonted laggard pace. Outside Macqueron's he had a thought to drink a glass of wine; but he felt in his pocket, he had not a sou, and he felt ashamed of showing himself, and afraid lest the story should be already known. Just then it seemed to him that Lengaigne, who was standing by his door, looked askance at him, as one looks at the barefooted beggars on the high roads. Lequeu, from behind the window-panes of the school, did not greet him. He understood that. He was falling back into everybody's contempt, now that he had no longer any possessions, was stripped once more, and this time stripped to the very skin.

When he came to the Aigre, Fouan leant for a moment against the parapet of the bridge. The thought of night, which would soon be on him, tormented him. Where should he lie? He had not so much as a roof. The Bécus' dog, which he saw pass, filled him with envy, for at least the animal knew the hole in the straw where he would sleep. He groped about confusedly, lethargic in the reaction after his anger. His lids were closed: he tried to remember the sheltered corners protected from the cold. It turned to a nightmare, the whole country-side defiled before him, naked and swept by the blasts of wind. But he shook himself, and awoke with a start of energy. It was no use to

despair of fortune. They would never leave a man of his age to die in the road.

Mechanically, he crossed the bridge and arrived in front of the Delhommes' little farm. At once, as soon as he perceived it, he diverged and turned behind the house so that he should not be seen. There he made a fresh pause and stood close under the wall of the shed, in which he heard his daughter Fanny talking. Could it be, then, that he had thought of returning to her? He, himself, could not have answered, his feet alone had brought him there. He saw once more the interior of the house, as though he had just come in—the kitchen on the left, his room on the first floor, at the end of the loft. His emotion made his legs fail him; he would have fallen had he not been supported by the wall. For a long time he remained motionless, with his old back propped up by the house. Fanny was still talking in the shed, although he could not distinguish her words: it was, perhaps, this rough, stifled sound that stirred his heart. But she must have been nagging at a servant-maid: her voice was raised; he heard it, dry and harsh, saying, without any coarse language, such wounding things to the wretched girl that she sobbed aloud. And he, too, was hurt by it; his emotion had passed, he grew hard at the thought that, if he had opened the door, his daughter would have welcomed him in that disagreeable voice. He imagined her repeating: "Papa will come and ask us to take him back, on his knees"—the sentence which had cut all ties between them for ever, as with the stroke of an axe. No, no! Rather would he die of hunger, rather sleep under a hedge than see her triumph with her proud air of a woman without reproach. He removed his back from the wall, and walked painfully away.

In order to avoid the road, Fouan, who believed that everybody was spying on him, passed up the right bank of the Aigre, beyond the bridge, and soon arrived in the midst of the vines. His idea was so to reach the plain without going through the village. However, it happened that he was obliged to pass alongside the Castle, where his legs seemed to have carried him, with

that sort of instinct of old beasts of burden returning to the stables where they have had their oats. The climb put him out of breath; he sat down in a corner, panting and meditating. Surely, if he were to say to Jesus Christ: "I am going to sue in Court, help me against Buteau," the rascal would receive him with open arms; and they would have a damned good spree that night. From the corner in which he sat, he could scent out, precisely, that a feast was in progress, a debauch which would go on till morning. His empty belly enticed him, he drew near, recognised Canon's voice, and the smell of beans stewing, which Slutty cooked so excellently when her father wished to celebrate his comrade's reappearance. Why shouldn't he go in, and tipple with the two scamps, whom he could hear wrangling, in a mist of smoke from their pipes, nice and snug, and so drunk that he envied them? A sudden report, produced by Jesus Christ, went to his heart; he advanced, had his hand on the door, when Slutty's shrill laugh paralysed him. It was Slutty now who terrified him, he had a constant vision of her, lean, in her night-dress, flinging herself upon him in her snake-like nakedness, searching him, devouring him. And then, what was the good if the father helped him to recover his papers? The daughter would be there to strip him of them. Suddenly, the door opened, the hussy came to cast a glance outside, having got scent of somebody. He only had time to throw himself behind the bushes; and he escaped, distinguishing, in the falling night, her green, gleaming eyes.

When Fouan reached the plain, was on the plateau, he experienced a sort of feeling of relief at having escaped from other people, was content to be alone and die. For a long time he wandered at random. The night had come, the icy wind whipped him. At times, at certain fierce blasts, he was obliged to turn his back, with his breath coming short, his bare head sprinkled with a few white hairs. Six o'clock struck, everybody in Rognes was feeding; and he had a faint feeling in his legs which made him walk slower. Between two squalls a shower fell, sharp and stinging. He was drenched, but he walked still, faced two other

ones. And, without knowing why, he found himself in the Place de l'Église, in front of the old ancestral house of the Fouans, which at present occupied by Françoise and Jean. No! he could not take refuge there; from there, too, he had been driven away. The rain redoubled, grew so fierce that a feeling of cowardice overwhelmed him. He had drawn near the Buteaus' door, hard by, peered into the kitchen, when a smell of cabbage-soup issued. All his poor body was composing itself to submission, his physical need of food and warmth drove him to it. But between the noise of their jaws, words interchanged brought him to a halt.

"And the father, if he wasn't to come back?"

"Let him bide, then! He's too fond of his belly not to come in when he's hungry!"

Fouan moved away, full of fear lest they should perceive him at their door, like a beaten dog which slinks back to its kennel. He was choked with shame, a wild resolution came to him to drop down and die in some corner. They should soon see if he was fond of his belly! He descended the hill again, sank down on a beam in front of Clou's smithy. His legs could carry him no longer, he gave himself up in the black desolation of the road, for the *up-sittings* had begun, the bad weather had caused the houses to put their shutters up; not a soul seemed alive there. Now the showers had caused the wind to fall; the rain rustled down, straight and continuous, with the violence of a deluge. He could not muster the strength to rouse himself and seek a shelter. With his stick between his knees, his head drenched with rain, he remained motionless, stupefied with too much suffering. He did not even reflect; things were so; when one had neither children, nor home, nor aught else, one tightened one's belt, and slept in the street. Nine o'clock struck; then ten. The rain continued; it racked his old bones. But some lanterns appeared, and passed rapidly along: it was the finish of the *up-sittings*, and he was aroused once more, when he recognised La Grande, who was on her way home from the Delhommes, where

she had been saving candles. He rose with an effort which made his limbs creak, and followed her at some distance, but did not arrive in time to enter at the same moment with her. Before the shut door he hesitated; his heart failed him. At last he knocked; he was too wretched. It must be admitted that he had come at an unlucky time, for La Grande was in a ferocious mood, the result of an unhappy business which had disorganised her the week before. One evening she had been alone with her grandson, Hilarion, and it came into her head to make him split some wood and get further work out of him before she sent him to his straw, and as he tackled the task indolently, she waited there, inside the wood-shed, and covered him with abuse. Hitherto, in his terrific abasement, the stupid and deformed brute, with his muscles of an ox, had let his grandmother abuse his strength without so much as venturing to raise his eyes to her. For the last few days, however, she should have distrusted him, for he had been groaning beneath his excessive burdens, whilst sudden hot fits of his blood had made his limbs stiffen. She made the mistake of striking him across the neck with the end of her stick in order to urge him on. He dropped the bill-hook and looked at her. Irritated at this revolt, she lashed him on the waist, the thighs, anywhere, until suddenly he rushed upon her. Then she thought to be thrown down, trampled upon, strangled; but no, he had been kept too abstinent since the death of his sister, Palmyre—his anger turned into a mad lust, conscious neither of relationship nor age: hardly of sex. The brute violated her—this old hag of eighty-nine, with a body like a dried twig, which kept no more than the withered skeleton of the female. But strong still, and unconquerable, the old woman resisted him, was able to seize the bill-hook, and with one blow laid his skull open. At his cries, the neighbours rushed in; she related the story, gave the details: a mere shave more, and she would have been done for, the bugger was just on the point! Hilarion died on the following day. The magistrate came; then, there was the funeral; then, all sorts of bother, from which she was now recovered, luckily, and calm,

but ulcerated with the ingratitude of people, and resolved never again to do a service to any members of her family.

Fouan had to knock three times, so timidly that La Grande did not hear him. At last she came, brought herself to ask:

"Who's there?"

"Me."

"Who are you?"

"Me, your brother."

No doubt she had recognised the voice at once, but had not hurried herself, for the pleasure of making him talk. There was an interval of silence; she asked again:

"What do you want?"

He trembled, dared not answer. Then, brutally, she opened the door; but as he was entering, she barred the way with her lean arms, left him in the street beneath the pelting rain, whose melancholy downfall had not ceased.

"I know—what you want. They came and told me that at the *up-sitting*. . . . Yes, you've been fool enough to be had again; you've not even known how to keep the money you've hidden, and you want me to get it back for you, do you?"

Then, at sight of him excusing himself, stammering out explanations, she lost control of herself.

"If I hadn't warned you! But I've told you, over and over again, that you must be a fool and a coward to give up your land! . . . So much the better that you're as I said you would be, driven out by your beggarly children, roaming about in the night like a beggar who hasn't so much as a stone of his own to sleep on!"

He lifted up his hands and wept, he tried to push her aside. She withstood him; she finished unburdening herself.

"No, no! Go back and ask a bed from the people who've robbed you. I don't owe you anything. The family would accuse me again of meddling in their affairs. . . . All the same, it's not for that; you've given away your property, *that* I'll never forgive."

And drawing herself up, with her shrivelled neck and round eyes, like the eyes of a bird of prey, she flung the door to in his face, savagely.

"You've done well, die in the street!"

Fouan stood there, stiff and motionless, before the pitiless door, whilst behind him the rain poured down still, with its monotonous rustle. At last he turned his back, he was swallowed up again in the inky night that encircled that slow and icy downpour from the sky.

Where was he to go? He remembered where he was with difficulty. His feet slipped in the puddles, he groped with his hands so as not to knock against the walls or trees. He thought, knew nothing more; this corner of the village, every stone of which he knew, was like a distant land, unknown and terrible, where he felt himself lost and strange, incapable of guiding his way. He turned to the left, and was afraid of holes; turned again to the right, and stopped, shuddering, and menaced on every side. And having come across a fence, he followed it until he reached a little gate, which yielded. The soil gave way, he rolled into a hole. It was better there, the rain was kept off, and it was warm, but a grunting noise warned him he was in company with a pig, who, being disturbed, and thinking of food, had already pushed his snout into his ribs. A struggle began, he was so weak that his fear of being mangled drove him out. Then, unable to proceed any further, he lay down against the gate, bunched and gathered up into a heap so that the projection of the roof might shelter him from the wet. Nevertheless, the drops continued to moisten his legs, and the gusts of wind made his damp garments strike a chill into his body. He envied the pig; he would have gone back to it had he not heard it, behind his back, gnawing the door with voracious grunts. With the dawn, Fouan issued from the painful sleep in which he had been sunk. He was seized with shame, shame at telling himself that his story was all over the place, that everybody who came along the road knew him—a pauper. When a man has no longer any-

thing of his own, there's no justice, there's no pity to be expected. He crept along by the side of the hedges, full of anxiety lest he should see a window open, and some early-rising woman might recognise him. The rain poured down incessantly; he reached the plain, hid himself under a rick. And the whole day was spent by him in fleeing in this manner, from shelter to shelter; he was in such a panic that, every two hours, he thought himself discovered and changed his hole. The single idea now which racked his brain was a wish to know how long it would take to die. He suffered less from the cold; hunger chiefly tormented him, doubtless it was of hunger that he would die. Still another night, another day too, perhaps. As long as it was light he felt no weakness, he would rather end so than go back to the Buteaus. But a fearful anguish overcame him with the falling dusk, a terror of beginning another night, beneath the obstinate downpour. The cold seized him again, penetrating to his bones, hunger gnawed at his sides intolerably. When the sky was black he felt as though he were drowned, swept away by those streaming shadows; his head lost its authority, his legs walked of their own accord, the animal ran away with him, and it was then, without having willed it, he found himself again in the Buteaus' kitchen, the door of which he had just opened.

Buteau and Lise were just finishing the cabbage-soup of yesterday. At the sound he turned his head, and he looked at Fouan silently, as he stood steaming in his drenched garments. A long time passed. At last he said, with a sneer:

"I knew very well you hadn't a heart."

The old man, with his face compressed and set, did not open his mouth: uttered no word.

"Come, wife, give him some grub, anyhow, since hunger's brought him back."

Lise had already risen and brought a bowl of soup; but Fouan took the bowl and went and sat apart on a stool, as though he declined to sit at table with his children; and he swallowed it greedily, in great spoonfuls. His whole body was trembling with

the violence of his hunger. Buteau finished his dinner leisurely, balancing himself on his chair, taking long shots at pieces of cheese, which he ate on the point of his knife. The greediness of the old man distracted him; he followed the spoon with his eye: said, banteringly:

"I say, it seems your excursion out-of-doors has given you an appetite; but it wouldn't do to indulge in one every day, you'd cost too much to keep."

The father swallowed, swallowed, without a word; his throat made a hoarse noise. And the son went on:

"Ain't he a funny bugger, to stay out all night! Perhaps he went to see the wenches. . . . Eh, is that what's fagged you out?"

Still no reply, the same obstinate silence; nothing but the violent deglutition of the spoonfuls he absorbed.

"Come, I'm speaking to you," cried Buteau, in irritation; "you might be polite enough to answer."

Fouan did not even raise his fixed, troubled eyes from his soup. He seemed neither to hear nor see, was isolated leagues away, as though he wished to say that he had come to eat, that his stomach was there, but that his heart was gone. Now he was scraping the bottom of the bowl roughly, in order to lose nothing of his portion. Lise, moved at his extreme hunger, permitted herself to interfere.

"Let him bide, you see he's half dead."

"I'll teach him not to start his bloody nonsense with me again!" Buteau went on, furiously. "Once—it may pass. But —do you hear, you damned obstinate?—what's happened to-day must be a lesson to you. If you give me any more bother, I'll leave you to die of hunger in the road!"

Fouan, having finished, painfully quitted his seat; and still dumb, with that silence of the tombs which seemed to grow more formidable, he dragged himself underneath the stairs to his bed, where he threw himself down, all dressed as he was. Drowsiness overwhelmed him, he was asleep in a moment, without a breath,

in a sleep like lead. Lise went to see him, and returned to tell her man that like enough he was dead. But Buteau, having followed her, shrugged his shoulders. "Oh yes, dead! Did one die like that? All the same, he must have knocked about finely to get in such a state!" The next morning, when they came in to cast an eye on him, the old man had not stirred; and he was still asleep that evening; only awoke in the morning after the second night, having been unconscious for thirty-six hours.

"What, up again?" sneered Buteau. "Why, I thought it would go on, that you wouldn't want any more bread!"

The old man did not look at him, made no answer, and he went out and sat by the road to get some air. Then Fouan grew obstinate. He seemed to have forgotten the deeds that they refused to give him back; at least he spoke of them no more, looked for them no more, indifferent, perhaps, or, in any case, resigned; but his rupture with the Buteaus was complete; he wrapped himself in his silence, as though he were buried, and apart. Never, in any circumstance, or for any requirement, did he address a word to them. The life in common continued, he slept there, ate there, saw them, rubbed shoulders with them from morning to night; but he had not a glance or a word for them, but wore the air of a blind or dumb man, had the lingering movements of a shade in the midst of the living. When they were tired of considering him, and never extracting a syllable from him, they left him alone to his obstinacy. Buteau, Lise, herself, also ceased talking to him, tolerating him in their company as a piece of moving furniture, and ending by losing all definite consciousness of his presence. The horse and the two cows counted for more. In the whole house Fouan had only one friend—little Jules, who was near the close of his ninth year. Whilst Laure, who was four years old, looked at him with the hard family eyes, and wriggled out of his arms, as suspicious and spiteful as though she had already condemned this useless mouth to feed, Jules took pleasure in hanging about the old man's knees. And he remained the last link which connected him with the life of the others, he served

as an intermediary when the need of a yes or no became imperative. His mother sent him, and he returned with the reply, for him only would the grandfather depart from his silence. In the desertion which he had suffered, moreover, the child, like a little house-wife, helped him to make his bed of mornings, and undertook to bring him his portion of soup, which he ate on his knees near the window, having never cared to resume his place at the table. Then they played together. Fouan's great pleasure was to lead Jules by the hand and go for a long walk straight in front of them. And on those days he unburdened himself of all that he buried within him, talking, talking, until his companion was bewildered, for he already found a difficulty in speaking, losing the use of his tongue, since he had ceased to employ it. But the old, stammering man, and the urchin, who had no ideas beyond nests and wild fruits, understood each other well enough to talk together for whole hours. He taught him to lay down bird-lime, he made him a little cage to keep grasshoppers in. That fragile childish hand within his own, as they went along the deserted roads of that country wherein he had no longer land or people, was all that sustained him, all that gave him any pleasure in living a little longer.

For the rest, Fouan was, as it were, erased from the number of the living. Buteau acted for him and in his stead, drew his money and signed for him, under the pretext that the old fellow had lost his wits. The interest, a hundred and fifty francs, resulting from the sale of the house, was paid him directly by M. Baillehache. He had only had any trouble with Delhomme, who had refused to give the two hundred francs of the annuity into any other hands than those of his father, and Delhomme, therefore, insisted on his presence; but he had hardly turned his back when Buteau confiscated the money. That made three hundred and fifty francs, to which, he said, in his whining voice, he had to put as much again, and more, before it was enough to pay for the old man's keep. He never spoke again of the bonds; they were kept there snugly. Later on, one would see. As for

the interest, it went always, according to him, to fulfil the agreement with Daddy Saucisse, fifteen sous every morning, for the purchase by life-annuity of an acre of land. He declared that it was impossible to abandon this contract, too much money had already been sunk in it. However, the rumour was current that Daddy Saucisse, having been intimidated and threatened with a bad turn, had consented to waive it by surrendering half the amount he had received, one thousand, out of the two thousand francs; and if the old villain held his tongue, it was the rascal's vanity—he didn't wish it to be thought that he had been choused in his turn. Buteau's instinct warned him that old Fouan would die first.

A year passed away, and Fouan, though each day he failed a little more, still lasted. He was no longer the tidy old peasant, with clean-shaven skin, paws spruce as a hare's, wearing a clean blouse and black trousers. In his face, which had grown lean and emaciated, there was only the huge bony nose left, extending towards the earth. Each year he stooped a little more, and now he went with his back bent double; would soon need but the least tumble to make him fall into the ditch. He crawled along on two sticks, wore a white beard, long and dirty, dressed in his son's worn-out garments, and was so unkempt that the sunshine abhorred him, as if he had been one of those aged tramps who haunt the high-roads in tatters and are given the go-by by all. And at the bottom of this wreck only the animal persisted, the human beast with the single instinct of living on. A devouring hunger made him rush at his soup; he was never satisfied, and even stole Jules' bread-and-butter if the child did not defend it. So they reduced his rations, even took advantage of it not to give him enough, under the pretext that it would be his death else. Buteau accused him of having been ruined at the Castle by Jesus Christ's company, which was true; for this peasant, of old so sober and hard to his body, who had lived on bread and water, had acquired toping habits, a taste for meat and brandy—so speedily is a vice caught, even when it is a son who corrupts his

father. Lise had been obliged to lock up the wine, she found it vanished so. Upon the days when she put the stock-pot on, little Laure kept watch by it. Ever since the old man had contracted a debt for a cup of coffee at Lengaigne's he and Macqueron had been warned that they would not be paid if they served him anything on credit. He maintained always his great, tragical silence; but sometimes when his bowl was not full, or they removed the wine without giving him his share, he took a long, fixed look at Buteau with his angry eyes, in an impotent fury of baulked appetite.

"Yes, yes, look at me," Buteau said; "if you think I keep animals who are no bloody good! People who like meat must earn it, you greedy-guts! Ay, ain't you ashamed of having taken to carousing at your age?"

Fouan, who had not gone back to the Delhommes through his obstinate pride, which had been wounded by a remark of his daughter, came to endure everything at the Buteaus—abuse and even blows. He thought no more of his other children; he resigned himself where he was, seized with such lassitude that the idea of extricating himself never occurred. Things would go no better anywhere else. What would be the good? Fanny, when she met him, passed him stiffly by, having sworn that she would never be the first to speak. Jesus Christ, of a more filial disposition, after having borne him a grudge for the nasty way in which he had left the Castle, had amused himself one night by making him abominably drunk at Lengaigne's, and then leaving him so at his own door. There was a fearful scene; the house was up in arms—Lise compelled to wash out the kitchen; Buteau swore that another time he would make him sleep on the dung-hill, so that the old man grew afraid, and distrusted his eldest born; so much so, that he had the courage to refuse his proffered refreshments. Often, too, he saw Slutty with her geese when he sat out-of-doors by the side of a road. She stopped, searched him with her small eyes, talked for a moment, whilst behind her, her birds waited, standing on one leg, their necks protruding. But

one morning he discovered that she had stolen his handkerchief; and after that, as soon as he saw her in the distance, he shook his stick to drive her off. She thought it fun, and amused herself by setting her geese at him, and only ran off when some passers-by threatened to thrash her if she didn't leave her grandfather alone.

So far, however, Fouan had been able to walk, and this was a consolation, for he was still interested in the soil, was always climbing up to revisit his former fields, with that mania of old incorrigibles who haunt their lost mistress' abode. He wandered slowly about the roads, with the painful steps of old age; he stopped by the side of a field, stood there for hours, leaning on his sticks; then he dragged himself in front of another, and forgot himself again, motionless, like a tree which had grown up there, until old age had withered it. His vague eyes no longer distinguished clearly corn, or oats, or barley. It was all misty; and there were confused memories which surged out of the past: this field, in such a year, had produced so many bushels. Even dates and figures were confounded, finally. There remained only one sensation, living and persistent: the earth; the earth which he had so desired, possessed so closely, the earth to which, during sixty years, he had given everything, his members, his heart, his life; the ungrateful earth which had passed into the arms of another male, and which continued to bring forth without reserving a share for him! A great sadness surged over him, at this notion that she knew him no more, that he had kept nothing of her, not a sou, nor a bit of bread, that he must needs die and rot within her, the indifferent one, who, out of his old bones, would make fresh youth. Certainly, to arrive at that, naked and infirm, was hardly worth the pain of killing oneself with labour! After he had pottered like this about his old fields, he let himself drop down on his bed, overcome with such weariness that one could not even hear his breath. But this, the last interest which he took in life, went with the use of his legs. Soon, it became so painful for him to walk that he hardly stirred from the vil-

lage. On fine days there were three or four positions which he preferred: the girders in front of Clou's smithy, the bridge over the Aigre, a stone-seat near the school; and he would move slowly from one of these to the other, taking an hour to go two hundred yards, and dragging his sabots along as though they were some cumbersome vehicle, ungainly and warped, with a feeble swaying of his loins. Often he let the whole afternoon glide away, while he squatted down on a girder to drink in the sunshine. His eyes were open, but a sort of daze kept him motionless. The people who passed by no longer nodded to him, for he had become an inanimate object. Even his pipe was a weariness to him; he gave up smoking it; it was so heavy on his gums, without mentioning that the labour involved in filling and lighting it exhausted him. His single desire was not to stir from his place; as soon as he moved he was chilled, and went shivering beneath the burning mid-day sun. His will and his authority being dead, this was the last collapse of him—he was an old animal, suffering, in his desolation, from the misery of having lived the existence of man. For the rest, he made no complaint, was resigned to be considered as the worn-out horse, who has had his use and must to the knackers when he eats his oats to no purpose. An old man!—he is good for nothing and he costs money. He himself had desired his own father's end. If his children, in their turn, wished for his, that excited in him neither astonish-earth resumes possession of him.

When a neighbour asked him:

"Well, Daddy Fouan, you're still up and about?"

"Ah!" he grumbled, "it takes a damned long time, dying does. And it isn't the will that's wanting anyhow."

And he spoke the truth, in his peasant's stoicism, which accepts death, even desires it as soon as he finds himself bare and the ment nor sorrow. It was inevitable.

One pain more awaited him. Jules grew tired of him, was enticed away by little Laure. The latter, whenever she saw him with the grandfather, seemed to be jealous. He was a nuisance,

that old man! It was more amusing to play together! And if her brother did not follow her, she hung on to his shoulders and dragged him with her. Then she would be so nice to him that he began to forget his kind house-wifey offices. Little by little she attached him to her completely, like a true woman already, having once determined to make this conquest.

One evening, Fouan had gone to wait for Jules outside the school; he was so tired that he counted on his help to climb the hill. But Laure came out with her brother, and as the old man sought with tremulous hand the hand of the child, she gave a haughty laugh.

"There he is, bothering you again—let him go!"

Then, turning to the other brats:

"I say, ain't he *soft* to let himself be bothered so?"

Then Jules, in the midst of their shouts, blushed, tried to play the man, escaped with a bound, shouting his sister's reproach to the old companion of his walks:

"You're a nuisance!"

In consternation, his eyes dim with tears, Fouan tottered, as though the earth had failed him now this little hand was withdrawn. Their laughter grew noisier, and Laure forced Jules to dance round the old man and sing to the tune of some childish glee:

"*Tombera, tombera pas . . . son pain sec mangera; qui le ramassera . . .*"

Fouan, in his weakness, took nearly two hours to get home by himself, his feet were so laggard, his strength so departed. And that was the end; the child gave up fetching his soup and making his bed; the bedding was not touched once a month. He had no longer even this urchin to talk to; he buried himself in absolute silence; his solitude was widened and increased. Never a word to anyone on any subject.

CHAPTER III

The winter ploughing season drew to its close, and this February afternoon, cold and dark, Jean had just arrived with his plough at his large Cornailles field, where there was still two good hours' work waiting him. It was one end of the field that he wished to sow with wheat—a Scotch variety of the grain, an experiment advised him by his former master, Hourdequin, who had even put at his disposal several bushels of the seed.

Suddenly Jean drove in the shaft at the spot where he had left the furrow on the previous evening; and making the share bite, with his hands on the guides of the plough, he threw at his horse the hoarse cry with which he excited him:

"*Dia hue! Hep!*"

Torrents of rain, after the fierce sunshine, had hardened the clay of the soil to such a depth that the share and coulter detached with difficulty the slice that they cut, ploughing with all their strength. One could hear the fat clod grate against the mould-board which up-turned it, burying it in the thick of the manure, a distributed coat of which covered the field. At times, an obstacle, a stone, caused a jar.

"*Dia hue! Hep!*"

And Jean, with straining arms, maintained the perfect precision of the furrow—it was so straight that it might have been traced with a line—whilst his horse, with lowered head, its feet buried in the soil, dragged at an uniform and continual pace. When the plough was clogged, he cleared it of the mud and grass with a thrust of his two hands; then it glided along once more, leaving behind it the earth, shifting and, as it were, alive, up-turned and fertile, naked to the very womb. When he reached the end of a furrow, he turned and began another. Presently a sort of intoxication came to him from all this agitated earth,

which exhaled a strong odour, the odour of those moist nooks where the sprouts germinate. His slow progress, the fixity of his gaze, compelled his giddiness. He would never become a true peasant. He was not born to the soil: he remained the former town artizan, the trooper who had made the Italian campaign; and all, that the peasants neither see nor feel, that he saw and felt —the great, melancholy peace of the plain, the mighty breath of the earth beneath the sunshine and beneath the rain. He had always had his notions of retirement to the country; but what a folly to have imagined that, on the day when he should drop his rifle and his plane, the plough would satisfy his tastes for tranquillity! If the earth was calm and kind to her lovers, the villages, planted upon her like nests of vermin, the human insects who lived upon her flesh, were enough to dishonour her and poison the approach to her. He remembered no period during which he had suffered so much as during that which had followed his arrival, already distant, at La Borderie.

Jean had to raise the guides a little to ease the plough. A slight deviation in the furrow put him out of temper. He turned back and stuck to it more closely, urging on his horse:

"Dia hue! Hep!"

Yes, how much suffering in those ten years! To begin with, his long waiting for Françoise; then, his war with the Buteaus. Never a day passed without a disagreeable incident; and at this time, now that he had Françoise, and they had been married for two years, could he call himself really happy? If for his part he loved her always, he had guessed rightly that she did not love him, would never love him, as he had desired to be loved—breast to breast, and mouth to mouth. They both lived in excellent agreement, the household prospered, worked, and saved. But it was not that; he felt her remote and cold, possessed with other thoughts, in their bed, when he embraced her. She was five months gone with child—one of those children got without pleasure, who give their mother only pain. Even this pregnancy had not brought them nearer. He suffered especially from a

sentiment, which was more and more defined, which he had felt on the evening of their entry into the house, that he remained a stranger to his wife—a man from another land, who had sprung up elsewhere, none knew where, a man who did not think like the people of Rognes, who seemed differently constructed, with whom she had no possible link, for all that he had got her with child. After the marriage, in her exasperation with the Buteaus, she brought back, one Saturday, from Cloyes, a sheet of stamped paper, in order to leave everything by will to her husband, for it had been explained to her how the house and land would revert to her sister should she die without having a child, the money and furniture alone resting in the participation. Then, without having made him any explanation on the subject, she appeared to have reconsidered it. The sheet of paper was still in the wardrobe, quite blank. And he had experienced a great secret sorrow, not that he was interested, but because he saw in that a flaw of affection. Besides, nowadays, when a little one was to be born, what was the good of a will? He was none the less heavy-hearted whenever he opened the drawer and caught sight of the stamped paper, which was now rendered useless.

Jean halted and let his horse breathe himself. He himself shook off his giddiness in that frosty air. With a slow gaze he took in the blank horizon, the huge plain, upon which other equipages, far in the distance, were swallowed up in the gray of the sky.

He was surprised to recognise Daddy Fouan, who had come from Rognes along the new road, yielding once more to some memory, to a need to revisit a bit of field. Then he lowered his head, was absorbed for a minute in consideration of the open furrow, of the disbowelled earth at his feet. It was yellow and thick at the bottom, the upturned clods had brought to the light, as it were, a rejuvenated substance, whilst beneath, the manure buried itself in a bed of rich fertility; and his reflections grew vague:—the odd notion that one had to burrow into the soil like this to get bread to eat, the trouble he felt because he knew that

he had not Françoise's love, other thoughts vaguer still, upon what was germinating there, upon his little one who would soon be born, upon all the labour which one performed, often without being any the happier for it! He resumed the guides, threw out his guttural cry:

"*Dia hue! Hep!*"

Jean was coming to the end of his ploughing, when Delhomme, who was returning on foot from a neighbouring farm, halted by the side of the field.

"I say, Corporal, have you heard the news? . . . It seems we are to have war."

He dropped the plough, started up, bewildered and amazed at the emotion which filled his heart.

"War—how's that?"

"With the Prussians, from what I'm told. It's in the papers."

With his fixed eyes, Jean saw once more Italy, the battles over there, the massacre from which he had been so glad to escape without a wound. At that time, with what ardour he had looked forward to a quiet life by his own hearth! And now, at this word, shouted from the road by a passer-by, the notion of war fired all the blood in his body.

"Lord! If the Prussians give us any nonsense. . . . We can't let 'em do as they bloody well like with us."

Delhomme was not of this opinion. He shook his head, declared that it would be the end of agriculture if they were to see the Cossacks back, as in the days after Napoleon. It was never any good, fighting; better far to come to an understanding.

"What I'm thinking of is the others. I've put aside money with Monsieur Baillehache. Whatever happens, Nénesse—he draws to-morrow—won't be taken."

"To be sure," concluded Jean, calming down, "that's like me; I don't owe them any more, and I'm a married man now. I can snap my fingers if they fight! . . . Ah, it's with the Prussians! Well! We'll give them a licking, that's all!"

"Good night, Corporal!"

"Good night!"

Delhomme went off again, and stopped further on to shout his news once more, and, further on, shouted it a third time; and the menace of approaching war floated through La Beauce, beneath the vast melancholy of the ashen-coloured sky.

Jean, having finished, took it into his head to go at once to La Borderie and fetch the promised seed. He unyoked his horse, and, leaving the plough at the end of the field, jumped upon his horse. As he went off, the thought of Daddy Fouan returned to him; he looked for him, and no longer saw him. Doubtless the old man had taken shelter from the cold, behind a straw rick which had remained in the Buteaus' field.

At La Borderie, Jean, having tied up his beast, called out in vain; everybody must be at work out of doors; and he had entered the empty kitchen, struck his fist on the table, when he heard at last the voice of Jacqueline, issuing from the cellar, where the dairy was situated. You went down to it through a trap-door, which gaped at the very foot of the stairs, in such an awkward position that there was always danger of an accident.

"Hullo! who's that?"

He had his foot on the first step of the little steep staircase, and she recognised him from below.

"What—it's you, Corporal!"

He also saw her in the semi-obscurity of the dairy, lit only by a skylight. She was at work there, in the midst of the bowls and strainers, from which the whey was run off, drop by drop, into a stone trough; and she had her sleeves tucked up to her armpits, and her bare arms were white with cream.

"Come down, then. . . . Are you afraid of me?"

She thou'd him as of old, she laughed with her air of being an attractive girl. But he was embarrassed, and did not budge.

"It's for the seed the master has promised me."

"Oh, yes! I know, . . . Wait, I'll come up."

And when she was in the full daylight he found her delight-

fully fresh, smelling sweetly of milk, with her naked, white arms. She looked at him with her pretty, perverse eyes; she finished by asking him, with a joking air:

"Aren't you going to give me a kiss? One needn't be impolite just because one is married."

He embraced her, making a point of giving two sounding kisses on her cheeks, as much as to say that it was simply out of good friendship. But she troubled him, memories affected his whole body with a little shiver. With his wife, whom he loved so greatly, he had never experienced that.

"Come along, then," resumed Jacqueline, "I'll go and show you the seed. . . . Just fancy, even the servant girl is gone to market."

She crossed the yard, entered the corn barn, turned behind a row of sacks; and there it was against the wall, in a heap kept together by some planks. He had followed her; he had a choking feeling at finding himself alone with her, in this secluded corner. Suddenly he affected a great interest in the seed—a fine variety of Scotch grain.

"Oh, isn't it big!"

But, with that cooing tone in her voice, she brought him quickly to the subject which interested her.

"Your wife's in the family way; you've been giving it her, ay? . . . I say, is it nice with her? Is it as good as it was with me?"

He grew very red; she was amused at it: delighted at having confused him. Then she seemed to grow gloomy at a sudden thought.

"I, you know, I've had a lot of bother. Luckily, it's over now, and I've come out of it with profit."

In effect, one evening Hourdequin had received a visit from his son, Léon, the captain, who had not shown himself there for years; and after the first day the latter, who had come to inform himself, was instructed when he discovered that Jacqueline occupied his mother's room. For a moment she trembled, for

she cherished the ambition of making him marry her and inheriting the farm. But the captain made an error in trying the old game. He wanted to rescue his father from her by letting himself be surprised by him in bed with her. It was too simple. She made a show of impregnable virtue, uttered cries and shed tears, and declared to Hourdequin that she would go away, since she no longer met with respect in his house. There was an abominable scene between the two men; the son endeavoured to open his father's eyes—that was all that was necessary to ruin the situation. Two hours later he departed again, crying on the threshold that he would sooner sacrifice everything, and that if he ever returned it would only be to kick out the harlot at the point of his boot.

In her triumph then, Jacqueline made the mistake of believing she could risk everything. She let Hourdequin understand that, after such a scandal, which had set the whole country-side yelping, she must leave him if he did not marry her. She even began to pack her trunk. But the farmer, still upset by his rupture with his son, and all the more furious, in that secretly he knew himself to be in the wrong, and his heart bled, nearly murdered her with a couple of blows; and she said no more about leaving, understood that she had been in too great a hurry. For the rest, she was, nowadays, the absolute mistress, openly sleeping in the conjugal chamber, eating separately with the master, ordering and settling the accounts, holding the keys of the treasury, and was so despotic withal that he consulted her as to what decisions he should make. He was failing, was greatly aged, she hoped soon to vanquish his last scruples, to bring him to wedlock by the time she had worn him out completely. While she waited for this, as he had sworn to disinherit his son in his fit of passion, she was working to induce him to make a will in her favour; and she considered herself already proprietress of the farm, for she had extracted a promise from him one night when they were in bed.

"All the years I've worn myself out to keep him amused,"

she concluded; "you can understand it hasn't been for his *beaux yeux*."

Jean could hardly keep from laughing. As she spoke with a mechanical gesture, she had been plunging her bare arms into the corn; and she drew them out and replaced them, powdering her skin with a fine, soft powder. He watched the game; he made a reflection aloud, which he promptly regretted:

"And with Tron—it's still on?"

She did not seem hurt, she spoke freely as to an old friend.

"Oh, I'm very fond of him, the great hulking chap, but really he's got no sense! Oh, ain't he jealous! Yes, he makes scenes, he stands nobody but the master, and—even then, I believe he comes and listens of nights to see if we're asleep."

Once more Jean gave signs of mirth. But she was not laughing; she nourished a secret fear of the giant, whom she declared to be treacherous and suspicious like all Percherons. He had threatened to strangle her if she deceived him. So that she no longer went with him without trembling, in spite of the taste she had retained for his massive limbs—she herself being so slight and frail that he could have crushed her between his thumb and four fingers. Then she gave a pretty shrug with her shoulders, as much as to say that she had proved the stronger with others besides him. And she went on, with a smile:

"I say Corporal, it went better with you; we were so well agreed."

Without quitting him with her pleasant eyes, she had resumed stirring up the wheat. He was once more conquered, forgot his departure from the farm, his marriage, the child that was to be born. He seized her wrists, deep in the seed, passed his hands over the length of her arms, soft with flour, up to her infantile bosom, which seemed to grow firmer beneath men's abuse. And it was this she had desired ever since she had seen him looking through the trap-door, a resurrection of her old kindness, as well as her wicked pleasure in ravishing him from another woman, a lawful wife. Already he had caught hold of her,

was turning her over on the heap of corn, all languishing and cooing, when a long, lean face—that of the shepherd, Soulas—appeared from behind the sacks, coughing harshly and spitting. Jacqueline was up again with a bound, whilst Jean stammered out, breathlessly:

"All right, that's it; I'll come back and fetch five bushels of it. Oh, isn't it big, isn't it big!"

She watched the back of the shepherd, who had not retreated, furiously; she murmured between her clinched teeth:

"It's too much now! Even when I think I'm alone, he's there to bother me. I'll have him turned away, that's what I'll do!"

Jean, grown cold again, hastened to leave the barn, and he untied his horse in the yard, in spite of Jacqueline's signs. She would have hidden him in the heart of the conjugal chamber sooner than renounce her desire. But, anxious to escape, he repeated that he would return on the following day. He started on foot, leading his horse by the bridle, when Soulas, who had gone out and was waiting for him, said to him at the gate:

"Are there no honest men left, that you, you too, are at it again? . . . Do her the service, then, to tell her to keep her mouth shut, if she doesn't want me to open mine. Ah! there'll be a row one of these days, see if there won't!"

But Jean went straight on, with a fierce gesture, refusing to mix himself up with it any more. He was full of shame, irritated at what he had almost done. He, who believed that he loved Françoise, had never experienced at her approach those mad attacks of desire. Was it because he loved Jacqueline better? Had that troll left fire in his body? All the past arose before him; his anger waxed bigger when he felt that, in spite of his revolt, he would return to see her. And, shuddering, he leapt on his horse, and galloped it, so as to be the sooner back at Rognes. As it happened, that afternoon Françoise took it into her head to go and cut a bundle of lucerne for her cows. It was she who ordinarily looked after this work, and she made up her mind to

go, thinking she would find her man up there, ploughing; for she hardly liked to venture there alone, in her fear of coming in contact with the Buteaus, who, in their fury at not having the whole field to themselves, were continually seeking to provoke a nasty quarrel. She took a scythe; the horse should bring back the bundle. But when she arrived at Cornailles, she was surprised to see no trace of Jean, whom, indeed, she had not forewarned of her coming. The waggon was there; where, then, could he be? And what gave the last touch to her agitation was her recognition of Buteau and Lise, who were standing by the field, waving their arms with a furious air. No doubt they had just come to a halt on their way home from some neighbouring village, where they had been out for the day, having nothing to do. For an instant she was on the point of beating a retreat. Then she reproached herself for this fear, she was free to go on her own land; and she continued to advance, with her scythe thrown over her shoulder. The truth was, that when Françoise met Buteau thus, especially by himself, she was thrown into consternation. For two years she had not spoken a word to him. But she could not behold him without a thrill running through her body. It was very likely anger, it was very likely something else. On several occasions, on this same road, as she went to her lucerne-plot, she had perceived him in front of her in this fashion. He turned his head twice, three times, to look at her with his gray eyes, spotted with yellow. A little shudder ran through her, she hastened her steps in spite of her effort, whilst he slackened his; and as she passed him, their eyes searched each other for a moment. Then she was troubled at feeling him behind her, her limbs stiffened, she could hardly walk. At the time of their last encounter she had been so startled that she had fallen down flat, hindered by the protruding womb of her pregnancy, when she tried to leap from the road into her lucerne. He had burst out laughing.

That evening, Buteau gave a malicious account to Lise of her sister's tumble; both looked at each other with a glance which

reflected the same thought: if the baggage was to die, child and all, the land and house came back to them. They knew, through La Grande, the incident of the will, which had been put off and become useless since the pregnancy. But they had never had any luck; there was no fear of fortune relieving them both of mother and child! And they returned to the subject when they were in bed; it was merely something to talk of, it doesn't kill folk, talking about their death. Just suppose Françoise was to die without an heir, how everything would arrange itself, what a dispensation of Providence! Lise, poisoned by hatred, ended by vowing that her sister was no longer her sister, that she would hold her head down on the block, if it only wanted that to give them their own again—their home, from which the hussy had driven them out so shamefully. Buteau, for his part, was not so greedy, declared that it would be nice enough for him only to see the child die before it was born. The pregnancy had particularly irritated him; a child, that was the end of his obstinate hope, the definite loss of the property. Then, as they both got into bed together, and she blew out the light, she gave a singular laugh, remarked that as long as the kids haven't come, they needn't come. A silence reigned in the darkness; then he asked why she had said that. Pressed close to him, with her mouth to his ear, she made a confession. Last month she had been awfully bothered at finding herself "caught" once more; so that, without informing him, she had gone off to Mother Sapin, an old woman of Magnolles, who was a witch. In the family-way, once more—no, thanks! He *would* have given her a good reception! Mother Sapin, as if it were quite simple, had just got rid of it with a needle. He heard her without approving or disapproving, and his satisfaction was only apparent in the humorous fashion in which he expressed his idea that she ought to have got hold of that needle for Françoise. She grew merry, too, seized him in both arms, and whispered that Mother Sapin had taught her another way—oh, such an odd way! Well, what was it then? Why, a man could undo what a man had done: he only had to

have the woman, make three signs of the cross on her belly, and say an " Ave " backwards! The child, if there was one, would go like the wind. Buteau interrupted with a laugh, affected to disbelieve, but the ancient credulity which was bred in the bone of their race made them shiver, for everyone was aware that the old woman of Magnolles had turned a cow into a weasel, and raised the dead to life. It must be so, if she said it. After that Lise wheedled him and begged him to try on her—the " Ave," said backwards, and the three signs of the cross—she wanted to find out if she would feel anything. No, nothing! It was because the needle had been enough. On Françoise it would have worked ravages! He jested: did she think he could? Of course, why not? Hadn't he had her before? Never! He protested against it now, whilst his wife, getting jealous, dug her nails into his flesh. They fell asleep in each other's arms.

Since that time, the thought of this child which was coming, which would deprive them forever of house and land, haunted them; and they never came across the younger sister without their gaze being immediately directed to her womb.

When they saw her coming along the road, they measured her with a glance, and were horrified at noticing how her pregnancy advanced, and how soon it would be too late.

" S'help me! " roared Buteau, as he came up to the ploughed field and examined it, " the thief has taken a good foot off us. There's no disputing it, there's the land-mark! "

Françoise continued to draw near, at the same tranquil pace, concealing her fear. She understood by this time the cause of their furious gestures; Jean's plough must have encroached on their field. This was a perpetual source of dispute between them; not a month elapsed without some question as to the boundary throwing them at each other. It could only end in blows or litigation.

" Do you hear? " he continued, raising his voice, " you're on our land, I'll make you take yourself off! "

But the young woman had gone into her patch of lucerne, without so much as turning her head.

"We're talking to you!" cried Lise, beside herself. "Come and see the mark, if you think we're lying. You must make a note of the damage."

And in the face of her sister's silence, her assumption of contempt, she lost all control over herself and rushed at her with her fists clenched.

"Come now—do you mean to make game of us? I'm your elder sister, you owe me some respect. I know how to bring you on your knees and ask pardon for all the dirty tricks you've played us!"

She was facing her, mad with anger, blinded with wrath.

"On your knees, bitch—on your knees!"

Silent still, Françoise, as on the evening of the eviction, spat in her face. And Lise was shrieking, when Buteau interfered, thrust her violently on one side.

"Let be; this is my business!"

Ah, yes, she left it to him! He might twist her neck, and break her back, as though she were some worthless tree; he might make her into food for dogs, or use her as his drab—it was not she who would prevent him, she would rather help him. And from that moment she stood upon guard, on the watch, lest anyone should disturb him. Around them, beneath the gloomy sky, the vast gray plain extended without a living soul.

"Go on, then; there's nobody by."

Buteau advanced upon Françoise, and when she looked at him, at his hard face, his stiffened arms, she thought he was going to beat her. She had not let go of her scythe, but she trembled; already, moreover, he had caught her wrist; he snatched it from her and threw it into the lucerne. The only way to escape him was to retreat backwards; she moved thus into the adjoining field, and made for the rick which stood there, as though she hoped to use it as a rampart. He, without hurrying himself, seemed equally desirous to drive her here. His arms had gradually

opened, his face was distorted into a silent smile, which uncovered his gums. And, suddenly, she realized that it was not his wish to beat her. No; he wished something else, the thing which she had refused him for so long. She trembled more, then, as she felt her strength abandon her—she who had been so valiant, had struck out so vigorously of old, when she swore that he should never succeed. Yet she was no longer a stripling, she was twenty-three years old last Martinmas, a real woman now, with a mouth, red still, and big eyes like crown pieces. It was a feeling within her so languid and sluggish that her limbs seemed to be overcome by it. Buteau, still forcing her to retreat, spoke at last, in a voice that was low and ardent:

"You know quite well it's not over between us. I want you, and I'll have you!"

He had succeeded in cornering her against the rick; he seized her by her shoulders and threw her down. But, at this moment, giddy as she was, she struggled with him, in her habit of long resistance. He held her still, avoiding her kicks.

"Since you're with child now, you bloody fool, what's the risk? Get along, I won't make another, you can be very sure!"

She burst into tears; it was as though she had some sort of seizure; she defended herself no longer, her arms were twisted, her legs shaken with a nervous shudder; and he could not possess her, was thrown on one side at each fresh attempt. Anger rendered him brutal; he turned to his wife:

"Damn you, you're no good! What are you looking on for? Come and help me, if you want me to do it!"

Lise had remained standing, straight and motionless, ten yards away, now searching the distant horizon with her eyes, now turning them upon the other two, without moving a muscle of her face. At her man's call, she showed no hesitation, but advanced, caught hold of her sister's left leg, pulled it out, and sat upon it, as though she would have liked to crush it. Françoise, thus nailed to the soil, abandoned herself, her nerves exhausted, her eye-lids closed. However, she was conscious of what was hap-

pening, and when Buteau had possessed her, she was carried away in her turn by a spasm of pleasure so acute that she grasped him in both arms, as though she would stifle him, uttering a long cry. Some crows were flying by, and they took fright at it. From behind the rick, the white head of old Fouan appeared; he had taken shelter there from the cold. He had seen everything; was afraid, no doubt, for he covered himself again in the straw.

Buteau had got up, and Lise was watching him with a fixed gaze. She had been pre-occupied with a single thought, to assure herself that he was doing it right: and through the heart he put into it he had forgotten everything—the sign of the Cross, and the "Ave" said backwards. She was struck with this, and strangely angered. Was it for the pleasure, then, that he had done it?

But Françoise did not leave him time to explain himself. For an instant she had remained on the ground, as it were succumbing to the violence of this love-delight of which she had been ignorant. Suddenly the truth had dawned on her: she loved Buteau; she had never loved, she never could love, another. This discovery filled her with shame, infuriated her against herself, in the revolt of all her sense of justice. A man who was not hers, her sister's husband, whom she loathed, the only man she could never have without being infamous! And she had let him fulfil his purpose, and she had held him so tight that he knew she was his!

She leapt up with a bound, wild and dishevelled, spitting out all her loathing in broken words.

"Pigs! Beasts! Yes, you are, both of you—pigs! beasts! You've ruined me. People have been hung for less than you've done. I shall tell Jean, filthy beasts! He will settle your business!"

Buteau shrugged his shoulders, sneeringly, pleased at having succeeded at last.

"Be quiet! You were dying for it. . . . We'll try it again."

This banter gave the last touch to Lise's exasperation, and the whole storm of her rising anger against her husband fell upon her younger sister.

"It's true, you whore, I saw you! You pulled him against you, you forced him. Didn't I tell you that all my misery has come from you? Do you dare to tell me, now, that you haven't corrupted my man—yes, on the very day after we were married, when you still wore bibs?"

Her jealousy flamed out strangely after her complaisance,—a jealousy directed less against the action than against the half which her sister's existence had taken from her. If this girl, of her own blood, had not been born, would it ever have been necessary to make a partition of the property? She execrated her for being younger, fresher, more desirable!

"It's a lie!" cried Françoise. "You know that it's a lie!"

"Oh, I'm a liar! You'll say, perhaps, you never wanted him, or ran after him into the cellar!"

"*I* did? *I* did? And just now, it was me, I suppose? Hag, didn't you hold me? Yes, you would have broken my leg! And that's what I don't understand—you must be infamous, or you must have wanted to murder me, you wicked woman!"

Lise answered at random with a blow. This brutality excited Françoise: she made a rush at her. With his hands in his pockets, Buteau stood sneering, like a vain rooster, for whom two hens are fighting. And the battle was resumed, furious and abominable, till their flesh was bleeding, their caps torn off; each sought with her fingers the spot where she could best tear out the other's life. Both had tussled with each other, until they had come back into the lucerne. But Lise gave a cry, Françoise had dug her nails into her neck; and then she saw red, had a definite, aching desire to kill her sister. On the latter's left she had caught sight of the scythe, which had fallen with its handle upon a tuft of thistles, its blade upwards. It happened in a flash; she flung Françoise down with all the strength of her wrists.

The unhappy woman tottered and swayed, with a lilt to the left, uttering a terrible cry. The scythe had penetrated her side.

"Damnation! Damnation!" yelled Buteau.

And that was all. A second had sufficed for the irreparable to come about. Lise, agape at seeing so swift a realization of what she had desired, watched the torn dress dyeing itself in a flood of blood. Had the steel penetrated actually to the child, then, that it should gush out so? From behind the rick, the pale face of old Fouan peered out again. He had seen the blow; he blinked his troubled eyes.

Françoise did not stir, and Buteau, who had drawn near, dared not touch her. A gust of wind passed, chilled him to the bone, made his hair bristle with a shudder of terror.

"God, she's dead! Let's be off!"

He had seized hold of Lise's hand; they were carried away, as it were, along the deserted road. The lowering, gloomy sky seemed to touch their heads; their galop left a noise behind them which was like that of a crowd let loose in their pursuit; and they tore over the shorn, empty plain, he with his blouse swelling out, she with dishevelled hair, her cap in her hand, both repeating the same phrase, growling like hunted beasts.

"God! She's dead! Run, in God's name!"

The length of their paces increased; they were no longer articulate, murmured involuntary sounds—an accompaniment to their flight—in which might still be distinguished:

"She's dead, s'help me! . . . dead, s'help me! . . . dead, s'help me!"

They disappeared.

Some minutes later, when Jean returned, trotting along on his horse, great was his grief.

"What is it? What's happened?"

Françoise had opened her eyes, but still she did not stir. She gazed at him for a long time with her great, anguished eyes; and she made no answer, as if she had been very far away, her mind full of other things.

"You are hurt, you are all over blood; answer me, I implore you!"

He turned to old Fouan, who had come up.

"You were there—what has happened?"

Then Françoise spoke in a weak voice.

"I came for grass. . . . I fell upon my scythe. . . . Ah, it's finished!"

Her gaze had sought Fouan's; she told him, him alone, the rest, those things which only the family must know.

The old man, in a dazed manner, seemed to understand; he repeated:

"That's true, she fell and hurt herself; I saw it."

It was necessary to run to Rognes to fetch a litter. On the way she lost consciousness again. They were afraid that she would be dead before they got her back.

CHAPTER IV

It was, precisely, on the following day, the Sunday, that the lads of Rognes were to go to Cloyes, to draw their lots; and just as, at the fall of night, La Grande and La Frimat, who had run round, were undressing, and then, with infinite precautions, putting Françoise to bed, the drum was being beaten in the road below, sounding a very dirge to those poor folk, out of the heart of that sad dusk.

Jean, who had lost his head, was on his way to fetch Doctor Finet, when he met, close to the church, the veterinary surgeon, Patoir, who had come to look at Daddy Saucisse's horse. He made him come in, by main force to see the wounded woman, in spite of the other's protestations. But, at sight of the horrible wound, he refused point blank to meddle with it—what was the good? There was nothing to be done. When, two hours later, Jean brought back M. Finet, he made the same gesture. Nothing to do but give narcotics to soothe the death agony. The five months' pregnancy complicated the case; one was sensible of the movements of the child, dying of its mother's death, of this womb laid open in its fertility. Before leaving, after having tried a compress, the doctor promised to return next day, although he declared the poor woman would not last the night. But she outlived it, notwithstanding—was still alive when, about nine o'clock, the drum began again, to re-assemble the conscripts in front of the school. All night long the heavens had poured torrents, a very deluge, that Jean had heard beating, in a daze, as he sat in the room, his eyes full of big tears. Now he heard the drum, muffled as though with crape, in the damp and warm morning. The rain had ceased, the sky had remained a leaden-coloured gray.

For a long time the drum was beaten. The drummer was a

new man, a nephew of Macqueron, who had returned from the army, and he drummed as though he were leading a regiment under fire. All Rognes was in an uproar, for the news, which had been circulated for some days past, of approaching war aggravated this year the emotion of the conscription, which was always so keen. Ah, thanks! To go and get one's head broken by the Prussians! Nine lads of the village were to draw—more, perhaps, than had ever been known. And amongst them were to be found Nénesse and Delphin, the old inseparables, though they had been separated now that the former was employed at Châtres in a restaurant. The night previously Nénesse had come to sleep at his parents' farm. Delphin had scarcely recognized him, he was so altered—quite a gentleman, with a cane, a silk hat, and a sky-blue tie enclosed in a ring; and he got his clothes from a tailor; laughed at Lambordieu's ready-made suits. The other, on the contrary, was thick-set and solid of limb, his head had been baked by the sun, and he had grown up strong, like a product of the soil. However, they had at once renewed their friendship. After having passed a part of the night together, they arrived arm in arm in front of the school, at the sound of the drum, whose rolling went on incessantly, obstinate and pervasive.

The parents were grouped around. Delhomme and Fanny, gratified at Nénesse's distinguished appearance, had wished to see him off, and they were without anxiety, since they had assured the result. As for Bécu, with his keeper's badge brightly polished, he was threatening to beat his wife because she cried. What now? Wasn't Delphin fit to serve his country? The lad, for his part, made light of it, feeling sure, he said, that he would draw a lucky number. When the nine were all united, which took a good hour, Lequeu delivered them the flag. There was a discussion as to the one on whom that honour should fall. Ordinarily, it was the tallest and biggest who carried it, so that, at last, they decided upon Delphin. He seemed to be troubled at it, being timid at heart, in spite of his big fists, and uneasy at any-

thing to which he was not accustomed. What a long affair it was, bothering his arms! And what if it brought him ill-luck!

At the two corners of the street, Flore and Cœlina, each in the parlour of her inn, were having a final turn with their brooms for the evening. Macqueron, with a gloomy face, was looking out from the threshold of his door, when Lengaigne appeared on his, laughing. It must be said that the latter was triumphing, for the terriers of the Excise on the previous day had seized four barrels of wine which were concealed in his rival's woodshed, and this disagreeable incident had compelled him to hand in his resignation as mayor, and there was nobody but was aware that the anonymous letter of denunciation had undoubtedly come from Lengaigne. As a climax to his misfortunes, Macqueron was furious at another disaster—his daughter Berthe had been so compromised by the wheelwright's son, to whom he had refused her, that he had finally been reduced to giving his consent. For the last week the women at the fountain had talked of nothing but the daughter's marriage and the action against the father. He was sure to be fined: very likely he would go to jail. In face, therefore, of his rival's insulting laugh, Macqueron preferred to go in again, being further embarrassed because other people were beginning to laugh.

Delphin, however, had caught hold of the flag, the drum began again, Nénesse started in single file, the other seven followed him. They looked like a small regiment as they marched along the flat road. Some urchins ran after them; some of the relations—the Delhommes, Bécu, and others—went as far as the end of the village. Once free of her husband, La Bécu hurried up and stole into the church; then, finding herself alone, she, who was by no means devout, dropped on her knees weeping, and prayed the Almighty to reserve a lucky number for her son. For more than an hour she murmured this earnest prayer. In the distance, the silhoutte of the flag gradually vanished in the direction of Cloyes; the beat of the drum was finally lost in the wide atmosphere.

It was not till ten o'clock that Doctor Finet re-appeared, and he seemed greatly surprised at finding Françoise still living, for he had imagined that he would have nothing more to do than write the death certificate. He examined the wound, and shook his head; he was pre-occupied with the story that had been told him, not, however, having any suspicion. It had to be repeated to him: how the devil had the poor woman tumbled on to the blade of a scythe? He departed, quite thrilled at such a misadventure, but put out because he would have to return for the certificate of death. But Jean had remained sombre, with his eyes fixed on Françoise, who closed her lids, and was dumb as soon as she felt her husband's gaze interrogate her. At daybreak, he had escaped for a moment, hurried up to the field of lucerne, wishing to see; and he had seen nothing precise, some footsteps effaced by the downpour during the night, a plot that was trampled down, no doubt at the spot where the fall had occurred. After the doctor's departure, he resumed his seat by the dying woman's pillow, alone with her now, La Frimat having gone to her breakfast, and La Grande having been forced to absent herself, in order to cast an eye on her own affairs.

"Tell me, are you in much pain?"

She closed her lips tighter, made no reply.

"Tell me—you're not concealing anything?"

He would have believed her dead already, had it not been for the small, painful breath which came from her breast. Since the previous night, she had been on her back, seized, as it were, with immobility and silence. In the fierce fever which burnt her, her will, deep down within her, seemed to have risen and fought against delirium, she was so afraid of speaking. She had always had a strange character, a damned obstinate head, as they said, the Fouans' head, that could never do anything like other people, and had notions which made people aghast. Perhaps she obeyed a profound family sentiment, stronger than hatred and the need of vengeance. What good was it, since she was dying. There were some things which one buried with one, in the bit of ground

whence all had sprung—things which one must never, at any cost, tell to a stranger; and Jean was the stranger, this man whom she had never been able to love with real love, whose child she carried away with her without completing it—as though she were punished for having ever begun it.

He, however, since he had brought her back to die, began to think of the will. All night long the idea haunted him, that if she died in this fashion, he would only have a moiety of the furniture and the money, a hundred and twenty-seven francs, which was in the wardrobe. He loved her well, he would have given his life to keep her; but his grief was even increased at the thought that he might lose with her both land and house. So far, however he had not dared to open his mouth on the matter: it was so hard, and there had, moreover, been always somebody by. At last, seeing that he should obtain no further knowledge of the way in which the accident had come about, he made up his mind—broached the other business.

"Perhaps there are arrangements you would like to make?"

Françoise, lying there stiffly, did not seem to understand. No change came over her closed eyes, her vacant face.

"Because of your sister, you know, in case any harm happened to you. . . . We have the paper there, in the wardrobe."

He fetched the stamped paper, went on, in a voice which grew more embarrassed:

"Yes? Do you want me to help you? See whether you're strong enough to write! . . . I'm not thinking of my interest. It's only, I thought you couldn't wish to leave anything to people who've done you so much ill."

She made a slight, tremulous motion with her eyelids, which proved to him that she understood. So she refused him, then? He was dazed at it, without comprehending. She, herself, perhaps, could not have told why she thus played the dead woman before she was nailed down between the four planks. The land, the house, were not this man's, who had crossed her life by chance, like a passer-by. She owed him nothing; the child was

going away with her. On what ground should the property pass out of the family? Her childish and obstinate notion of justice protested: this is mine, that is thine; let us cry quits, farewell! Yes, that was one thought, and there were other vaguer thoughts still—her sister Lise, far off, lost in the distance; Buteau alone, present, loved in spite of blows, desired and pardoned.

But Jean felt irritated; he, too, had been vanquished and tainted by the passion of the soil; he raised her up, and tried to hold her in a sitting position, endeavoured to put a pen between her fingers.

"Come now, is that possible? You would love them more than me, would let those scum have everything?"

Then Françoise opened her eyes, and the look she cast at him overwhelmed him. She knew that she was dying, her big dilated eyes expressed a fathomless despair. Why did he torture her? She could not, would not do it. Only a low cry of pain escaped her. Then she fell back again, her lids closed once more, her head lay motionless in the middle of the pillow.

Jean, ashamed of his roughness, was filled with such a feeling of uneasiness that he was still holding the stamped paper in his hand when La Grande returned. She understood; she took him aside to find out if there was a will. Stammering at his own lie, he declared, exactly so—he was hiding away the paper for fear Françoise was tormented. She appeared to approve; she continued to be on the side of the Buteaus, foreseeing all the abominations which would ensue if they should inherit. And when she had seated herself by the table, she began to knit, adding aloud:

"As for me, I shall certainly wrong nobody. The paper has been all ready this long time. Oh, everyone has his share; I should think it too dishonest to give anyone an advantage. You're in it, my children. It will come, it will come, one of these days!"

It was her daily remark to the members of the family, and

she repeated it, out of habit, by this bed of death. An internal laugh tickled her each time at the notion of the famous will which should make them all raven on each other when she was gone. She had not inserted a single clause without freighting it with the potentiality of a law-suit.

" Ah, if one could only take one's belongings with one! " she concluded. " But since that's impossible, it must go to make other folk merry."

La Frimat came back, in her turn, to take a seat at the other side of the table in face of La Grande. She was knitting also, and the hours of the afternoon succeeded each other, and the two old women conversed tranquilly, whilst Jean, who was unable to stay in one place, walked about, went out and returned, in a hideous suspense. The doctor had said that nothing could be done, and they did nothing.

La Frimat regretted at first that they had not sent to fetch Master Sourdeau, a bone-setter of Bazoches, who was equally good at wounds. He said some words, and healed them just by breathing on them.

" A famous man! " cried La Grande, respectful for once. " It's he who put right Lorillon's brisket. You know, Daddy Lorillon's brisket dropped. It was bent, and was such a weight on his stomach that he was like to die of weakness; and the worst was, Mother Lorillon took the dreadful plague, too—it's catching, you know. At last they all took it—the daughter, the son-in-law, the three children. . . . My word, they would be corpses, if they hadn't sent for Master Sourdeau, who cured them of it by rubbing their stomachs with a tortoise-shell comb."

The other old woman approved each detail with a nod of her chin. It was well known, there was no disputing it. She quoted another case herself.

"It was Master Sourdeau, too, who cured the Budins' little girl of the fever, by cutting a live pigeon in two and clapping it on her head."

She turned to Jean, who was standing in a daze by the bed.

"In your place, I'd send for him. Even now it may not be too late."

But he made a gesture of anger. He was spoilt by his town conceit, believed in none of these things. And the two women continued for a long time communicating to each other remedies —parsley under the mattress for diseases of the loins, three acorns in your pocket to cure a swelling, a glass of water blanched by moonshine, and drunk fasting, to stop the wind.

"Look here," went on La Frimat, suddenly, "if you're not going to fetch Master Sourdeau, you might call in Monsieur le Curé, all the same."

Jean made the same gesture of fury, and La Grande pursed up her lips.

"That's an idea! Whatever good would Monsieur le Curé do?"

"What good will he do? . . . He'll bring the Almighty with him; that's not bad at times."

She shrugged her shoulders, as much as to say that those ideas were done with. Everything in its own place—the Almighty in His place, other people in theirs.

"Besides," she remarked, after an interval of silence, "the Curé wouldn't come; he's ill. La Bécu told me just now that he went away in a carriage on Wednesday, because the doctor declared that he'd be safe to die at Rognes if he didn't get out of it."

In effect, for the two years and a half during which he had been in charge of the parish the Abbé Madeline had been steadily failing. Home-sickness, despairing regret for his mountains of Auvergne, had preyed upon him every day a little more, in front of this flat Beauce, whose infinite expanse wrapped his heart in sadness.

There was not a tree, not a rock, and ponds of brackish water instead of those lively streams which poured down, over yonder, in cascades. His eyes lost their colour, he grew still more hag-

gard; it was said that his lungs had gone. If he had even found any consolation in his parishioners! But, fresh from his former parish, which was so devout, the nervous timidity of his soul was sorely shaken by this new country eaten up with irreligion, and tolerant merely of an external conformity. The women made him giddy with their cries and quarrels, abused his weakness so far as to arrange the services in his stead; and this alarmed him, for he was full of scruples, and always in fear of falling unwittingly into sin. A last shock awaited him; on Christmas Day, one of the Children of Mary was taken with the pains of childbirth in church. And, after that scandal, he began to fail; they resigned themselves to sending him back to Auvergne to die.

"Then we're once more without a priest!" said La Frimat. "Who knows whether the Abbé Godard will care to come back?"

"Ah, the surly fellow!" cried La Grande, "he would die of vexation!"

But the entrance of Fanny imposed silence upon them. Of all the family, she was the only one who had called already, the night before; and she returned to get news. Jean contented himself with pointing at Françoise, with his trembling hand. A pitying silence reigned. Then Fanny lowered her voice to enquire if the sick woman had asked for her sister. No, she had not opened her mouth on the subject, it was as though Lise had not existed. That was very surprising, for however one may have quarrelled, death is death: when shall we make peace if we do not make it before we depart?

La Grande was of opinion that Françoise should be questioned about it. She rose and leant over her.

"Tell me, my child—Lise?"

The dying woman did not stir. There was only, beneath her closed lids, a barely perceptible tremor.

"Perhaps she expects us to send and fetch her. I will go."

Then, still without opening her eyes, Françoise said no, shaking her head gently on the pillow. And Jean desired that her

wish should be respected. The three women resumed their seats. The idea that Lise did not come of her own accord astonished them now. There was often the obstinate feeling in families.

"Ah, it's all so contrary!" went on Fanny, with a sigh. "Ever since this morning I can think of nothing along of this conscription. And there's no sense in it either, for I know, anyhow, Nénesse won't go."

"Yes, yes," murmured La Frimat, "but it excites a body all the same."

Once more the dying woman was forgotten. They talked of the chances of the lads who would be taken, and the lads who would be left. It was three o'clock, and, although they were not expected until five o'clock, at the earliest, news was already circulating, brought from Cloyes, one knew not how, by that sort of aerial telegraph, which stretches from village to village. The Briquet's son had drawn No. 13: no luck for him! The Couillot's lad had tumbled on 206, a good one for certain! But there was nothing known about the rest, the assertions were contradictory—and that brought their emotions to a pitch. No news of Delphin, no news of Nénesse!

"Oh, it's foolish, but my heart's beating so!" repeated Fanny. They called to La Bécu, who was passing. She had been back to the church, had wandered about like a body without a soul; and her anguish had grown so intense that she did not even stop to talk.

"I can't bear it any longer, I'm going to meet them!"

Jean was in front of the window, he did not listen, his eyes looked vaguely out. Ever since morning he had noticed on various occasions, that old Fouan was pottering round the house on his two sticks. Suddenly he saw him again, his face pressed against the window-pane, trying to make out what was passing in the room, and he opened the window; the old man looked alarmed, stammered out an enquiry as to how things went. Very badly; it was the end. Then he thrust in his head, gazed at Françoise from afar, and for such a long time it seemed as

though he could not drag himself away. Fanny and La Grande, when they perceived him, were seized with their old idea of sending for Lise. Each must give way a little, it couldn't end like this. But when they attempted to charge him with the commission, the old man, shivering with alarm, escaped. He growled, and mangled his words between his gums, grown rusty with silence.

"No, no. . . . Impossible—impossible!"

Jean was struck by his terror; the women made a gesture of resignation. After all, it was a matter for the two sisters, one could not compel them to make peace. And at that moment a noise arose, at first faint, like the buzzing of a big fly, then growing louder and louder, rustling like the wind through the trees. Fanny gave a start.

"Ah! The drum! . . . They're here—good night!"

She vanished, without even kissing her cousin for the last time.

La Grande and La Frimat went out to the door to look. There remained only Françoise and Jean: she, in her obstinacy of immobility and silence, hearing all, perhaps, and wishing to die like a hunted animal in the quiet of its lair; he, upright by the open window, torn by a feeling of uncertainty, plunged in a grief which seemed to issue from persons and things, from all the vast plain. Ah, that drum, how it grew louder, what echoes it aroused within him—that drum, whose continued beating mingled his memories of yesterday with his sorrow of to-day—memories of barrack and battles, the dog's life of those poor devils who have neither wife nor bairns to love them!

Directly the flag appeared in the distance, along the flat road, rendered sombre by the dusk, a troop of urchins started running to meet the conscripts, a group of relations formed at the entrance of the village. All the nine, and the drummer, were already very drunk, roaring out a song in the melancholy evening, beribboned with tri-coloured favours, most of them with their number fastened to their hats with a pin. When they were

in sight of the village, they shouted louder, and entered it with the swaggering air of conquerors.

It was still Delphin who held the flag. But he carried it over his shoulder, as if it were a troublesome rag whose use he could not see. He looked dishevelled, his face was set; he was not singing, and had no number pinned to his hat. Directly she caught sight of him, La Bécu rushed tremulously forward, at the risk of being knocked down by the marching band.

"Well?"

Delphin flung her savagely on one side, without slackening his pace.

Bécu had advanced in the same choking state as his wife. When he heard his son's remark, he asked no more; and as the mother burst into sobs, he had all the trouble in the world to restrain his own tears, in spite of his patriotic brag.

"What's the bloody use? He's taken!"

And falling behind, both returned painfully along the deserted road, the man recalling his hard life as a soldier, the woman turning her anger against the Almighty, to whom she had been twice to pray, and who had not listened to her.

As for Nénesse, he wore on his hat a splendid 214, bedaubed with red and blue. It was one of the highest numbers, and he was triumphant at his luck, waving his cane to beat time for and lead the wild chorus of the rest. When she saw the number, Fanny, instead of rejoicing, gave a cry of deep regret. Ah! if they had only foreseen, they wouldn't have paid a thousand francs into M. Baillehache's lottery. But, all the same, she and Delhomme embraced their son, as though he had just escaped from some great danger.

"Let me alone!"

The party continued their march, with brutal gusto, through the excited village. And the parents, certain of being sent to the devil, ventured nothing more. All these beggars had returned equally foul-mouthed, those who were going off, as well as those who were to stay. Besides, they didn't know what they were

saying—were intoxicated, as much from shouting as from drink. One merry little chap, who was playing the trumpet with his nose, had drawn a bad number, whilst two others, who were undoubtedly amongst the lucky ones, looked pale, with marks under their eyes. The infuriated drummer, at their head, might have led them to the bottom of the Aigre, and they would have all made the plunge.

At last Delphin gave up the flag in front of the *Mairie*.

"S'help me, I've had enough of this bloody machine; it's brought me bad luck!"

He seized Nénesse's arm and dragged him away, whilst the others invaded Lengaigne's wine-shop, with a crowd of their relations and friends, who at last heard the result. Macqueron appeared at his door; he was heart-broken to think of what his rival's takings would be.

"Come," repeated Delphin, in a short voice. "I am going to show you something new."

Nénesse followed him. There was plenty of time to come back and drink. The confounded drum was no longer beating in their ears, and it rested them to go thus along the empty road in the gathering darkness. And as his comrade was silent, buried in reflections which could not be gay, Nénesse began to talk of a big scheme. The day before last, at Châtres, having gone to amuse himself at the Rue aux Juifs, he had heard that Vaucogne, the Charles son-in-law, wanted to sell the house. It couldn't keep going any longer, with a sot like that at the helm, who would let his women eat him. But what a house to work up, what fat pickings for a lad who was neither a fool nor an idler, and knew the business. The thing was all the more seasonable, in that, at his restaurant, he was employed in the dancing-saloon, where he kept an eye on the behaviour of the girls—you should just see him! Then, the dodge was to give the Charles a fright, to point out to them that No. 19 was within an ace of being suppressed by the police, because of the disgraceful scenes that went on, and so get it for a mere song. Ah! That would be

better than tilling the soil; he would be a gentleman, right off!

Delphin, who was listening vaguely, absorbed in his own thoughts, gave a start, as the other gave him a malicious dig in the ribs.

"What luck some people have," he murmured. "You were born to be your mother's pride."

And he fell back into silence, whilst Nénesse went on with the air of a lad who was well up in his subject, explained the improvements he would introduce in No. 19, if his parents made him the needful advances. He was a trifle young, but he felt his true vocation. Just then he caught sight of Slutty, gliding past them in the shadow of the road, running off to meet some gallant; and, to instance his familiarity with women, he gave her a big push as she passed. Slutty, at first, was for returning the compliment; then, recognizing him and his comrade:

"What! It's you, is it? How you've grown!"

She laughed at the recollection of their old pastimes. She was still the one who had altered least, for she remained a mere stripling, for all her twenty-one years, still supple and slim as a poplar shoot, with the bosom of a little girl. The encounter pleased her; she kissed, first one, and then the other.

"We're still friends, ain't we?"

And she would have been willing if they had wished it, simply for the joy of being together again, just as people drink when they meet again.

"Listen," said Nénesse, in a joking way, "perhaps I'm going to buy the Charles shop. Will you come and work there?"

Suddenly she stopped laughing, choked, and burst into tears. The shadows of the road seemed to envelope her again: she vanished, sobbing out in childish despair:

"Oh, it's disgusting, disgusting! . . . I shan't like you any more!"

Delphin had remained dumb, and he started off walking, with an air of decision.

"Come along, I'll show you something new."

Then he hurried his pace, quitted the road to reach (across the vine-yards) the house where the commune had lodged the ranger since the presbytery had been given up to the priest. It was there that he dwelt with his parents. He made his companion enter the kitchen, where he lit a candle. He was pleased to find that his parents had not yet returned.

"We'll have a drink," he declared, setting two glasses and a bottle on the table.

Then, after he had drunk, he clacked his tongue, and added:

"That's just to let you know that if they think they've got me with their bad number, they're mistaken. When uncle Michel died, I had to go and live at Orléans for three days, and I almost died, it made me so ill being away from home. Ay, you think me a fool, but how can I help it? It's stronger than me. I'm like a tree which dies if it's rooted up. And shall they take me, and lead me to the devil, to places that I don't even know? Ah, no! ah, no!"

Nénesse, who had often heard him speak so, shrugged his shoulders.

"People talk like that, but they go, all the same. . . . There are the gendarmes!"

Without replying, Delphin turned round, and took in his left hand, from against the wall, a little chopper which was used for splitting fire-wood. Then he calmly placed the fore-finger of his right hand on the edge of the table, and at one sharp stroke the finger leapt off.

"That's what I had to show you. I want you to be able to tell the others whether a coward would do as much."

"You blasted lubber!" cried Nénesse, in consternation. "Is there any good in mutilating yourself? You're no longer a man!"

"Bloody lot I care! Let them come, the gendarmes! I'm safe not to go."

And he picked up the severed finger, and flung it into the fire of shavings, which was burning. Then, having wrung his

hand, which was all red, he wrapped it up roughly in his handkerchief, and tied a piece of string round it, to stop the bleeding.

"That mustn't prevent us from finishing the bottle, before we go and join the others. . . . Here's luck!"

At Lengaigne's, in the parlour of the wine-shop, you could no longer see or hear, what with the smoke and the row. There was a crowd of people, besides the lads who had just drawn: Jesus Christ and his friend Canon, busy in debauching old Fouan, all three sitting round a bottle of brandy; Bécu, blind drunk, knocked over by his son's bad luck, was overcome by sleep on a table; Delhomme and Clou, who were playing picquet:—not to mention Lequeu, who, with his nose in a book, affected to be reading in spite of the clatter. A fight between women had still further heated people's heads. Flore had gone to the fountain to fetch a pitcher of fresh water, and had been met there by Cœlina, who had rushed upon her with her nails, and accused her of having been paid by the excise men to betray her neighbours. Macqueron and Lengaigne ran up and almost came to blows also; the former vowed to the other that he would catch him in the act of damping his tobacco; the latter jeered, and twitted him with his resignation; and everybody had a finger in the business for the mere pleasure of shouting and clenching their fists—so that, for a moment, there seemed some danger of a free fight. It was over, but it left behind it an unsatisfied feeling of anger, a desire to battle.

To begin with, it almost broke out between Victor, the son of the house, and the conscripts. He, who had served his time, swaggered before these youngsters, bragged louder and louder, was goading them to make insane wagers—to empty a pint bottle down their throats from the air, or, again, to pump up a full glass through the nose, without letting a drop pass by the mouth. Then suddenly, talking of the Macquerons, and the approaching marriage of their daughter, Berthe, young Couillot sneered at "Got-none," and tried to be funny, and fired out all the old jokes. Look here, one must ask the husband about that, the

morning after! Had she any—yes, or no? It had been talked about for such a long time, it was tiresome at last.

And they were amazed at Victor's sudden passion, for, of old, he was the most obstinate in denying that she had any.

"Enough of that, now; she's got some!"

This assertion was greeted with an uproar. He had seen it, then; he had slept with her? But he denied this formally. One can see a thing without touching it. He had managed it, one day, that the idea of clearing up the matter had tormented him. Why not? It did no harm to anybody.

"Upon my word of honour, she's got some."

Then it was terrible when young Couillot, who was very drunk, insisted on shouting that she had none, without knowing, simply not to give in. Victor bellowed that he too had said that, that if he said it no longer it was not from any desire to support those dirty blackguards, the Macquerons! It was because the truth is the truth. And he fell upon the conscript; they had to drag him away from him.

"Admit she's got some, damn you, or I'll murder you!"

However, plenty of people still doubted about it. No one could explain the exasperation of the Lengaignes' son, for, as a rule, he was severe upon women. He had publicly disowned his sister, whose foul orgies, they said, had brought her to the hospital. That rotten piece, Suzanne! It was just as well she didn't come back and poison them with her carcass.

Flore brought up more wine, but in spite of the fresh toasting that began, insults and blows were in the air. No one would have given up in order to go and eat. When one drinks, one doesn't feel hungry. The conscripts thundered out a patriotic song, accompanied by such blows of their fists on the table that the three petroleum lamps flickered and poured out blasts of pungent smoke. It was stifling. Delhomme and Clou decided to open the window behind them. And it was at this moment that Buteau entered, and stole into a corner. He had not his habitual insulting air; his small, troubled eyes wandered about,

and glanced at people, one after the other. No doubt, he had come out for news, feeling a necessity of knowing the truth, no longer able to contain himself at home, where he had lived shut up since yesterday. The presence of Jesus Christ and Canon seemed to impress him, so much so that he did not seek a quarrel with them for having made old Fouan drunk. For a long time, too, he explored Delhomme. But the sleeping Bécu, whom the hideous hubbub had not aroused, especially occupied him. Was he asleep, or was he acting out of cunning? He touched him with his elbow, was a little reassured when he noticed that he was slobbering all down his sleeve. All his attention then was concentrated on the schoolmaster, whose expression struck him as extraordinary. What had happened, then, that he hadn't his face of every day?

In effect, Lequeu, although he affected to isolate himself in his book, was being shaken by violent starts. The conscripts, with their songs, their idiotic joy, made him beside himself.

"Buggers! Brutes!" he murmured, containing himself still.

For some months his position in the commune had been compromised. He had always been rough and brutal towards the children, whom he used to send off with a cuff to the family dunghill. But his temper had been growing more violent; there had been a nasty business with a little girl, whose ear he had cut open with a blow from a ruler. Parents had written, asking him to be removed. And, above all, the marriage of Berthe Macqueron had destroyed an old hope, distant calculations which he had believed near fulfilment. Ah, those peasants, a foul race, which refused him their daughters, and would take the bread out of his mouth for the sake of a brat's ear! Suddenly, as if he were in the middle of his class, he struck his book in his open hand, and called to the conscripts:

"A little silence, damn it! Does it seem to you so fine to go and get your throats cut by the Prussians?"

People turned their eyes on him in amazement. No, certainly, it was not fine at all. They were all agreed on that. Delhomme

repeated his idea, that everyone should defend his own field. If the Prussians came to Beauce, they would see that the Beaucerons were not cowards. But to go and fight for other people's fields —no, no, there was nothing fine in that! Just then, Delphin, followed by Nénesse, arrived; he was very flushed, his eyes bright with fever. He heard, and as he sat down beside his comrades he shouted:

"Right you are; let them come, the Prussians, and we'll soon put an end to them!"

People had noticed the handkerchief tied round his hand, and questioned him. Nothing—a cut. With his other fist he struck the table savagely, and ordered a bottle.

Canon and Jesus Christ watched the lads without anger, with an air of superior compassion. They, too, were of opinion that they must be young and finely foolish. Even Canon finished by showing emotion, full of his idea of organising future happiness. He talked loudly, his chin resting on his two hands.

"War! oh, bloody rot! it's time we were the masters. . . . You know my plan. No more military service, no more taxes. Complete satisfaction of his appetite for everyone for the least possible amount of work. . . . And it will come; the day's drawing near when you shall keep your money and your children, if you're on our side."

Jesus Christ was approving, when Lequeu, who could contain himself no longer, burst out:

"Oh yes, my bloody joker! your earthly paradise, your dodge for forcing people to be happy in spite of themselves! What humbug! Do you think it's for us? Don't you see we're too rotten, already? We want the savages to come and wipe us out first—the Cossacks or the Chinese!"

This time the astonishment was so keen that there was complete silence. What next? He was talking, this sly fellow, this chap with piss in his veins, who had never shown a soul the colour of his views, and who ran off for fear of his betters directly there was any manly talk! They all listened, especially

Buteau, who was uneasy and expectant of what should be said, as though these matters had some relation to his affair. The open window had dispersed the smoke, the mild moisture of the night entered; from afar the great, dark peace of the sleeping country-side could be felt. And the schoolmaster, bursting out of his ten years' timid reserve in his fury at his compromised life, relieved himself at last of the hatred which choked him.

"Do you suppose the folk about here are more stupid than their calves, that you come and tell them that the larks will fall, all ready roasted, into their mouths? . . . Why, before you've got your machine into working order, there'll be an end of the soil; it will be played out!"

Beneath the roughness of this attack, Canon, who had never yet met his master, quailed perceptibly. He tried to bring in his old stories of those gentlemen in Paris—the whole soil to the state, scientific agriculture on a huge scale. The other cut him short.

"I know—and it's folly! When you attempt it, your agriculture, the fields of France will have vanished long ago, swamped by the wheat from America. Look here! This little book I was reading, just gives the details of the thing. Ah, God's truth! our peasants can lie down, the candle's snuffed out!"

And in the same voice in which he might have given a lesson to his pupils he told of the wheat from yonder parts. Huge plains, vast as whole kingdoms, in which all Beauce would be lost, like a mere clod of earth; land so fertile that, instead of manuring it, it was necessary to drain it by a preliminary crop, which did not prevent it, withal, from bearing two harvests; farms of thirty thousand hectares, divided into sections, subdivided into lots, each section under a superintendent, each lot under a foreman—farms provided with buildings for men, cattle, tools, and cooking; agricultural regiments enlisted in the spring, and organized on the basis of an army taking the field, living in the open air, lodged and boarded, washed for, doctored, and

disbanded in the autumn; furrows, many kilomètres long, to plough and sow; oceans of grain, to whose boundaries the eye could not reach, to be reaped; man only required for surveillance, all the labour being performed by machinery, ploughs double-armed with sharp shares, seedlips and harrows, combined reaping and binding machines, steam threshers with straw elevators and collectors; peasants who are mechanics, a group of artizans on horseback following each machine, always ready to jump down and tighten a nut, renew a bolt, forge a connection—in fine, the earth turned to a bank and run by financiers, the earth administered according to fixed rules, shorn clean and yielding to the material, impersonal might of science tenfold to what it disputed to the love and labour of man.

"And you hope to carry on the struggle with your twopenny-halfpenny tools?" he continued. "You, who know nothing, want to know nothing, but stagnate in your routine! Ah, yes, you're up to your knees in it now—in the wheat from over yonder, and it will increase, the boats will always bring over more. Wait a bit—you will be up to your waist in it, then up to your shoulders—then it will be over your head! A river, a torrent, a flood, which will swamp you all!"

The peasants' eyes gaped, they were seized with panic at the notion of this inundation of foreign wheat. They were suffering from it already; could it be that they were going to be swamped and ruined by it, as this beggar declared? The thing took material shape before them. Rognes, their fields, the whole of Beauce, was swallowed up.

"No, no, never!" cried Delhomme in a choked voice. "The government will protect us."

"They're sly rogues, the government!" resumed Lequeu with an air of contempt. "Let them protect themselves, then! . . . The ridiculous part of it is, you've elected Monsieur Rochefontaine. The Master of La Borderie was consistent with his ideas, at least, in standing by Monsieur de Chédeville. . . . However, the one or the other, it's the same dummy on a wooden

leg. Not a chamber would dare vote a duty that was high enough; Protection can't save you—you're played out, and good-night to you! "

There was a tremendous uproar; everyone was talking at once. Couldn't they prevent it from entering, this wheat of misfortune? They would sink the boats in the harbour, they would receive those who brought it with gun-shots. Their voices grew tremulous, they would have stretched out their arms, weeping and supplicating, to be saved from this abundance, this cheap bread, which threatened the rural districts. And the schoolmaster answered, with sneers, that it was something new to see; of old, the one terror was famine, they were always in fear of not having enough wheat, and it was a pretty state of things when one had got to be afraid of having too much. He grew intoxicated with his own words, over-ruled their vehement protestations.

" You're a finished race, your imbecile love of the soil has eaten you up. Yes, love for the strip of soil which has enslaved you, and dwarfed your understanding, and for which you would commit murder! For centuries you've been wedded to the soil, and it's been deceiving you. . . . Look at America! The farmer is the master of the soil. No tie attaches him to it, neither of family nor association. As soon as his field is exhausted he moves on further. If he hears that a thousand miles off more fertile tracts have been discovered, he shifts his tent, and sets it up there. In fine, it's he who commands, and who gets himself obeyed, thanks to machinery. He is free, he gets rich, whilst you are prisoners and die of want! "

Buteau turned pale. Lequeu had looked at him when he spoke of murder. He tried to put a good face on it.

" We're as we're made. What's the good of caring, since you say yourself it won't change anything? "

Delhomme approved, they all started to laugh again, Lengaigne, Clou, Fouan, even Delphin and the conscripts, who had been amused by the scene in the hope that it would end in blows.

Canon and Jesus Christ, annoyed to see this ink-squirt, as they called him, shout louder than themselves, affected to jeer also. They felt obliged to side with the peasants.

"It's idiotic to get angry," declared Canon, shrugging his shoulders. "You must organise."

Lequeu made a terrible gesture.

"Very well! I—I'll tell you at last. . . . *I* believe in razing everything to the ground!"

His face was livid; he flung his phrase at them, as though he wished to assassinate them with it.

"Damned cowards! Yes, the peasants, all the peasants. To think that you are the most numerous, and that you let the gentry and the town artizan eat you up! Damnation! I've only one regret, that my father and mother are peasants. Perhaps that's why you disgust me all the more. For there's no disputing it, you would be the masters. Only, here it is! You've no union amongst yourselves, you're isolated, suspicious, ignorant, you employ all your rascality to eat each other up, amongst yourselves. Eh? What do you hide underneath your still waters? I suppose you're like stagnant ponds, they look deep, but you can't drown a cat in them. Oh, to be blind force, force for which the future waits, and to make no more stir than a log! And then, the exasperating thing is, you've ceased to believe in the priests. Come, if there's no such thing as God, what prevents you? When the fear of Hell restrained you, I can understand that you went on your bellies; but now—up then! Rob everything, burn everything! And, in the meantime, do what would be easier and better, go on strike! You've all got savings, you could hold out as long as you would need. Only grow enough for your own wants, take nothing more to market, not a bag of wheat, not a bushel of potatoes! It would be the death of Paris! Damnation, what a clean sweep!"

It seemed as though, through the open window, a cold breath from afar, from the black profundity, had entered. The petroleum lamps flickered high. No one interrupted the madman any

more, in spite of the uncomplimentary remarks he passed on each. He finished with a roar, striking his book on a table till the glasses rang.

"I tell you that, but I'm calm about it. Cowards, as you are, it's you, and your class, who will pull everything to the ground, when the hour comes. It has often happened before, it will happen again. Wait until hunger and wretchedness throw you on the towns, like wolves. And this corn they're bringing in, perhaps it's the opportunity. When there's too much, there won't be enough; there will be dearth again. It's always wheat that brings revolt and murder. . . . Yes, yes, the towns burnt and destroyed, the villages deserted, the land unfarmed and overgrown with brambles, and blood—rivers of blood, so that it shall give bread again for the men who shall come after us!"

Lequeu had violently opened the door. He disappeared. Behind him, out of the general stupefaction, a cry rose. The brigand! He ought to have his throat cut! A man who had always been so quiet hitherto! Why, he must have gone mad! Delhomme, thrown out of his habitual calm, declared that he should write to the préfet; and the others urged him to do so. But it was Jesus Christ and his friend Canon who seemed especially excited, the first with his '89, his humanitarian legend—liberty, equality, fraternity; the second with his organization—social; authoritative, and scientific.

They were still pale, exasperated at not having found a word in reply; they were more furious than the peasants, and shouted that a rogue of that kind ought to be guillotined. Buteau, at all the blood which this madman had demanded, this river of blood, which he poured, with a gesture, on the soil, had risen with a shudder, his head shaken by involuntary nervous tremors, as though he approved. Then he stole along by the wall, looking out askance, to see if he were followed, and vanished in his turn.

The conscripts, forthwith, started their revelry again. They grew vociferous, were wanting Flore to cook them some sausages, when Nénesse nudged them, and pointed out Delphin, who had

fallen in a swoon, with his head upon the table. The poor fellow was as white as a sheet. His handkerchief had slipped off the wounded hand, and was covered with red stains. They shouted into the ear of the still sleeping Bécu; and he woke at last, staring at his son's mutilated hand. No doubt he understood, for he caught hold of a bottle, to finish him off, he roared out. Then, when he had been led out, swaying to and fro, they heard him outside, in the midst of his oaths, burst into tears.

That evening, Hourdequin, having heard at dinner of Françoise's accident, came to Rognes to ask for news, out of a kindly feeling towards Jean. He came on foot, smoking his pipe in the black night, pondering over his troubles in the midst of the great silence; he descended the hill before calling on his old servant, grown a little calmer, desirous to spin out his walk. But below, the voice of Lequeu, which the open window of the wine-shop seemed to waft across the darkness of the country, caused him to halt, motionless in the shadow. Afterwards, when he decided to turn back, it followed him; and now, in front of Jean's house, he heard it still, subdued and, as it were, sharpened by the distance, and always with the same precision, like the sharp stroke of a knife. Jean was outside, by his door, leaning against the wall. He could remain no longer by Françoise's bed, he suffocated, he suffered too much.

"Well, my poor fellow," asked Hourdequin, "how is it getting on with you?"

The unhappy man made a gesture of dejection.

"Ah, monsieur, she's dying!"

And neither of them said more; the great silence fell again, whilst Lequeu's voice still surged up, sharp and obstinate. At the end of a few minutes, the farmer, who listened in spite of himself, let these words of anger escape him.

"Well? Do you hear him bellowing—that fellow? How strange it sounds, what he says, when one's sad!"

All his troubles came back to him at this distracting voice,

hard by this woman in her death agony. The earth, which he had so greatly loved, with a sentimental, almost intellectual passion, had finished him since the last harvest. His fortune had been sunk in it; soon La Borderie would not even bring him enough to eat. Nothing had succeeded with it—neither energy, nor new crops, nor chemical manures, nor machinery. He accounted for his disaster by his lack of capital, yet he was not certain, for the ruin was general; the Robiquets had just been evicted from La Chamade, the rent of which they were unable to pay; the Coquarts were being compelled to sell their farm of St. Juste. And he had no means of escaping from his bondage, he had never felt himself so utterly the prisoner of his land; each day money was tied up in it, the expenditure of labour bound him to it with a tighter chain. The catastrophe was at hand which should put an end to the secular rivalry between small and large holdings by destroying both alike. It was the beginning of the time he had predicted, when wheat had fallen below sixteen francs, was sold at a loss—the earth's bankruptcy brought about by social causes that were stronger, certainly, than any will of men.

And suddenly Hourdequin, bleeding from his defeat, approved Lequeu.

"Damnation! He's right! Let it all come to smash, let us all die, and brambles grow everywhere, now that the race is finished and the soil worn out!"

He added, with an allusion to Jacqueline:

"As for me, luckily, I've another burden on my back which would have broken it before that."

But within the house they heard La Grande and La Frimat walking about and whispering. Jean shuddered at the slight noise. He went in—too late. Françoise was dead; perhaps, had been dead some time. She had not opened her eyes, nor moved her lips. La Grande had only just realized that she was gone, when she touched her. Very white, her face thin and rigid, she seemed to be sleeping. Standing at the foot of the

bed, Jean looked at her, dazed with a confusion of ideas—the sorrow he felt, his surprise that she had not wished to make the will, the sensation that some part of his existence had been broken off and finished.

At that moment, as Hourdequin, after raising his hat in silence, walked away, still sombre, he saw, on the road, a shadow detach itself from the window and plunge into the darkness. He had a notion that it was some vagrant dog. It was Buteau, who had come there to watch for the death, and who hastened to announce it to Lise.

CHAPTER V

On the morning of the following day, they finished disposing of the body of Françoise on the bier, and the coffin was resting, in the middle of the room, on two chairs, when Jean gave a start of indignant surprise, at the sight of Lise and Buteau entering, one behind the other. His first impulse was to drive them out, these heartless relations, who had not come to greet her dying, and who only arrived when the coffin lid had been nailed down, and they were relieved from their dread of being in her presence. But the other members of the family who were present, Fanny and La Grande, stopped him. It brought bad luck to quarrel round a dead person, and, moreover, it was impossible to prevent Lise from expiating her bitterness, if she chose to watch by her sister's remains.

And the Buteaus, who had counted on the respect due to the coffin, installed themselves. They did not say that they had taken possession again of the house; they merely did it, in a natural way, as if the thing befell of itself, now that Françoise was no longer there. She was there still, indeed, but packed up for the long journey, no more in the way than a piece of furniture. Lise, having sat down for a moment, forgot herself so far as to open the cupboards, to assure herself that the things had not been changed during her absence. Buteau was already prowling about the shed and stable, like a man who was at home, casting a master's eye about him. By the evening, they both of them seemed to have returned home, and it was only the coffin which disturbed them now, in the room, the middle of which it filled up. However, there was only another night to wait—the floor would be free again early the next morning.

Jean stumbled about in the midst of the family with a vacant face, not knowing what to do with his limbs. At the outset,

the house, the furniture, the body of Françoise, had seemed to belong to him. But as the hours elapsed, all that grew detached from himself, and seemed to pass to the others. When night fell, no one addressed him further; he was nothing more there than a tolerated intruder. He had never before had so painful a sense of being a stranger, of having none of his own round him, amongst these people who were all allied, all agreed, so soon as it was a question of excluding him. Even his poor, dead wife ceased to be his own; so much so, that Fanny, when he spoke of watching by the body, had wished to drive him away, under the pretext that there were too many people there. He had persisted, however; he had even taken thought to possess himself of the money in the wardrobe, the hundred and twenty-seven francs, to make sure that they should not fly away. Lise, when she opened the drawer on arriving, must have seen them, as well as the sheet of stamped paper, for she had started an eager whispering with La Grande; and it was since then that she had installed herself at her ease, feeling sure that there was no will. The money, at least, she should not have. In his dread of the morrow, Jean told himself that, at any rate, he would keep that. Then he had spent the night on a chair.

On the morrow, the funeral took place early, at nine o'clock, and the Abbé Madeline, who was to leave that evening, was able to say the Mass, and go as far as the grave. But there he lost consciousness, and had to be carried home. The Charles came, as well as Delhomme and Nénesse. It was a respectable funeral, with nothing superfluous. Jean wept, Buteau wiped his eyes. At the last moment, Lise declared she was worn out, would never have the strength to follow her poor sister's body. So she had remained in the house alone, whilst La Grande, Fanny, La Frimat, La Bécu, and other neighbours had followed. And on their return, all this company, which had lingered expressly in the Place de l'Église, assisted, at last, at the scene which had been foreseen and expected since the previous evening.

So far, the two men, Jean and Buteau, had avoided looking

at each other, for fear a fight should result over Françoise's body when it was hardly cold. Now, they both walked towards the house at the same determined pace. At his first glance, Jean understood why Lise had not gone to the funeral. She had wanted to be alone, in order to move in—at least, as far as her heavy furniture was concerned. An hour had been just sufficient to throw the bundles over La Frimat's wall, and bring round breakable articles in a wheel-barrow. At last, with a slap, she had sent Laure and Jules into the yard—they were quarrelling there already, whilst Daddy Fouan, whom she had driven there also, was puffing on the bench.

The house was won back.

"Where are you going?" asked Buteau, roughly, as he stopped Jean outside the door.

"I'm going home."

"Your home! Where's your home? Not here, no-how. Here's our home."

Lise ran out; and, with her arms akimbo, she yelled at him, more furious, more virulent than her man.

"What's that? What's he want—the rotten beast? It's long ago he infected my poor sister; and the proof is, that, but for that, she wouldn't be dead of her accident; and she showed her feeling by leaving him nothing. Strike him, Buteau! Don't let him in, or he'll give us his bloody disease!"

Jean, choking at this rough attack, was yet ready to try argument.

"I know the house and land go back to you. But half the furniture and live-stock is mine——"

"Half! You've a cheek!" went on Lise, interrupting him. "You dirty ponce! You'd dare take half anything, you, that didn't bring so much as a brush and comb with you, but came in your bare shirt. So it's women you want to live on—a nice blackguard's trade!"

Buteau supported her, and with a gesture which swept the threshold:

"She's right, take yourself off! . . . You've got your coat and breeches; be off with them, we're not keeping them."

The family, especially the women, Fanny and La Grande, who had halted thirty yards off, seemed to approve by their silence. Then Jean, pale at the outrage, struck to the heart by this accusation of base calculation, lost his temper, and shouted as loud as the others:

"So it's like that, you want a row. . . . Well, you shall have one! To begin with, I'm going in. I'm at home, until the division is made. And then I'm going to get Monsieur Baillehache to put on the seals and make me the trustee. I'm at home; it's you who must be off!"

He advanced so furiously that Lise released the door. But Buteau leapt at him, and a struggle ensued; the two men rolled into the middle of the kitchen. And the quarrel was resumed inside; the issue now was which would be turned out of doors, the husband or the sister and brother-in-law.

"Show me the paper which makes you the masters."

"The paper—you can wipe yourself with it. It's enough that we've got the right on our side."

"Then come with the broker, bring the police, as we did when we came."

"The broker and the police—let them go to Hell! It's only sots who want their help. Honest folk settle their accounts themselves."

Jean had intrenched himself behind the table in a furious need to prove the stronger, not wishing to leave this dwelling, where his wife had died, and wherein it seemed to him all the happiness of his life had been contained.

Buteau, maddened, too, with a determination not to yield the reconquered domain, realized that he must finish it. He went on:

"And, besides, that's not all—you're a shit!"

He had bounded over the table, fell upon the other. But the latter seized a chair, and brought him to the ground by flinging

it across his legs; and he was taking refuge in the adjoining room, meaning to barricade himself in, when the woman suddenly remembered the money, the hundred and twenty-seven francs, she had seen in the drawer of the wardobe. She thought he was running to secure them; she forestalled him, opened the drawer, gave a howl of grief.

"The money! Blast him! he's stolen the money in the night!"

And, after that, Jean was lost, having to guard his pocket. He shouted that the money belonged to him, that he would make up the accounts, and there would be assuredly more owing him. But neither the woman nor the man heeded him; the woman had rushed upon him, was hitting harder than the man. With a frantic push he was dislodged from the bedroom, brought back to the kitchen, where all three of them rolled about in a confused heap, rebounding off the corners of the furniture. He kicked out and freed himself of Lise. But she came back, drove her nails into his neck, whilst Buteau, taking a run, butted him with his head, like a ram, and sent him sprawling outside on the road.

They stopped there, blocked up the door-way with their bodies, clamouring:

"Thief, to have stolen our money! Thief! Thief! Thief!"

Jean, having picked himself up, answered, stammering with pain and anger:

"Very good; I'll go to the judge at Châteaudun, and he will reinstate me; and I'll have the law on you for damages. Good-day!"

He made one last gesture of menace, and disappeared up towards the plain. The family, when they saw it was coming to fisticuffs, had prudently departed, because of the possible litigation.

Then the Buteaus gave a savage cry of victory. At last, they had flung him out of doors—the stranger, the usurper! And

they were back again, in the house; they had said rightly they would come back! The house! The house! At that idea, that they were back again in the old, ancestral house, built in old times by an ancestor, they were seized with a fit of mad joy; they galloped through the rooms, shouting till they were hoarse, for the mere pleasure of shouting at home. The children, Laure and Jules, ran about, and beat on an old pan for a drum. Only, old Fouan remained on the stone bench, watching them pass, with troubled eyes, without a smile.

Suddenly, Buteau halted.

"God's truth! He's made off up yonder; what if he's gone to do some harm to the land!"

It was absurd, but that cry of passion had upset him. The thought of the land recurred to him with a spasm of anxious pleasure. Ah, the land! His bowels yearned for it more even than for the house! That bit of land, up yonder, which filled the gap between his two slices, which restored his domain of three hectares, a domain so fair that Delhomme himself did not possess the like of it! All his flesh was quivering with joy, as at the return of some desired woman whom one has believed lost. An immediate need to see it again, in his mad fear that the other could carry it away, turned his head. He started at a run, muttering that he would be in too great agony until he knew for certain.

In effect, Jean had climbed on to the plain, in order to avoid the village; and, out of habit, he took the road to La Borderie. When Buteau caught sight of him, he was just passing alongside of the Cornailles land; but he did not halt, he only cast, at this field so keenly disputed, a glance of defiant sadness, as though he accused it of having brought him misfortune; for a recollection had just moistened his eyes, that of the day when he had talked with Françoise for the first time. Wasn't it at Cornailles that La Coliche had dragged her, still a child, over the lucerne? He went on, at a slower pace, with lowered head, and Buteau, who was spying him, hardly reassured and sus-

pecting him of planning some bad turn, was free to approach the field in his turn. He stood erect, and contemplated it long; it was still there, it did not look as though it had suffered, no one had done it any harm. His heart swelled within him, with the thought that he possessed it once more, for ever. He bent down, took up a clod in both hands and crumbled it through his fingers. It was rightly his land, and he went home, humming a tune, as he were drunk with the scent of it.

In the meantime, Jean walked on, his eyes vague, without knowing whither his feet were leading him. At first, he had meant to hurry to Cloyes, to M. Baillehache, in order to get reinstated in the house. Afterwards, his anger had cooled. If he went back to-day, he would have to leave to-morrow. Why not, then, accept his great sorrow at once, since the thing was done? Besides, the worthless crew were right: poor he had arrived, poor he went away. But the especial load on his heart was, when he told himself that Françoise's dying wish had been that things should be so, since she had not willed him her property. He gave up, therefore, the project of acting on the instant; and when, after being soothed by his walk, his anger kindled again, he went no further than to swear he would drag the Buteaus to justice, to make them restore his share, the moiety of everything that was included in the partnership. They should see whether he would let himself be plucked like a gander!

Raising his eyes, Jean was astonished to find himself in front of La Borderie. An inner impulse, of which he was only semi-conscious, had led him to the farm as to a refuge. And, in effect, he did not wish to leave the district—was it not there that he would be given the means of staying on, work and lodging? Hourdequin had always esteemed him: he had no doubt that he would meet with a prompt welcome. But in the distance, the sight of La Cognette, rushing wildly across the yard, disturbed him. Eleven o'clock struck; he had fallen upon a fearful catastrophe. That morning, coming down before the servant, Jacqueline had found the trap-door into the cellar open

at the foot of the stairs—that trap-door placed so dangerously; and Hourdequin was at the bottom—dead. He had broken his neck upon the edge of a step. She had given a cry, people had rushed in, the farm was in a state of dismay. Now the farmer's body was lying on a mattress in the dining-room, whilst Jacqueline was in the kitchen, a prey to despair, her face discomposed but tearless. As soon as Jean entered, she spoke, relieved her feelings in a choking voice.

"I always said so, I wanted it to be moved—the hole! But who can have left it open? I'm certain it was shut last night when I went up. Ever since this morning I've been racking my brains to think."

"Did the master come down before you?" asked Jean, stupefied at the accident.

"Yes, it was hardly daybreak. . . . I was asleep. It seemed to me that a voice called him from below. I must have dreamt it. . . . He often got up in that way, and went down, always without a light, to catch the men when they got up. . . . He can't have seen the hole, he must have fallen. But who, who can have left the trap open? Oh, it will kill me!"

Jean, whom a suspicion had suddenly struck, abandoned it on the instant. She had no interest in his death, her despair was genuine.

"It's a great misfortune!" he murmured.

"Oh, yes, a great misfortune, a terrible misfortune for me!"

She lay back on her chair, as crushed as though the walls had fallen in upon her. The master, whom she counted on marrying her! The master, who had sworn to leave her everything by will! And he was dead without having time to sign anything. And she wouldn't even get her wages; the son would come back, and kick her out of doors, according to his promise. Nothing! a few jewels and some linen, what she had on her body! It was disaster, it was ruin!

What Jacqueline did not relate, thinking no more of it, was

the dismissal of the shepherd, Soulas, which she had procured the day before. She accused him of being too old, of incompetency, furious at feeling him always behind her back, spying upon her; and Hourdequin, little as he was of her opinion, had yielded, so pliant had he become to her in his bondage, being reduced to purchase pleasant nights by slavish submission. Soulas, having been dismissed with fine words and promises, had looked at the master fixedly with his pale eyes. Then he slowly began to let loose his tongue against the whore, the cause of all his misfortune; told of the galoppade of males, Tron, after so many others, and the latter's story, and her insolent and impudent lechery, known to all, so much so that in the country-side it was said that the master must like it—the leavings of the man. The farmer, aghast, vainly endeavoured to interrupt him, for he clung to his ignorance, was resolved not to know, in his terror lest he should be forced to cast her off; the old man went on to the end, without omitting one of the occasions on which he had surprised them. Jacqueline was ignorant of this recital, Hourdequin having escaped across the fields, afraid lest he should strangle her, if he saw her again. Afterwards, on his return, he had simply dismissed Tron, under the pretext that he left the yard in an abominable state of filth. Then she had a suspicion; but she had not dared to defend the cow-herd, contriving merely that he should sleep there that night, and counting on being able to arrange the matter on the morrow, so as to keep him. And all that, at present, was upset by the stroke of destiny, which had undone her ten years of laborious calculation.

Jean was alone with her in the kitchen, when Tron appeared. She had not seen him since the previous day; the other servants were wandering about the farm, unoccupied and anxious. When she perceived the Percheron, that huge animal with the skin like a child's, she gave a cry, merely at the way he sidled in.

"It was you who opened the trap!"

In a moment she understood it all; and he turned white, with staring eyes, tremulous lips.

" It was you that opened the trap and called him, so that he should fall down! "

Jean had withdrawn, awestruck at this scene. Neither of them, however, seemed conscious of his presence, in the violence of the passions which shook them. Tron, with his face lowered, confessed incoherently:

" Yes, it was me. He dismissed me—I shouldn't have seen you again—it was not possible. . . . And then, I had thought before, how, if he were to die, we should be free to be together."

She listened to him, stiffened in a state of nervous tension which turned her stomach. He, with grunts of satisfaction, poured out all that had been pent up in his dull brain, a humble but ferocious jealousy of the servant against the master he obeyed, a stealthy project of crime, to assure himself of the possession of this woman whom he desired to be his alone.

" When the thing was done, I thought you'd be pleased. I didn't tell you anything because I thought it would give you pain. Then, now he's not in the way, I'm come to take you, so that we can go and get married."

Jacqueline broke out, in a brutal voice:

" You! But I don't care for you, I don't want you! Ah! you killed him to get me. Then you must be a bigger fool even than I thought you. What folly—before he married me or made a will! You've ruined me, you've taken the bread out of my mouth. It's my back you've broken, mine—do you understand?—brute! And you suppose I'm going to come with you! Come, just look me in the face, and tell me if you're making game of me! "

He listened, in his turn, gaping, stupefied at this unexpected greeting.

" Because I've larked with you, because we've had some pleasure together, do you imagine I'm going to be bothered with you for good? We marry! No, no, no! I'd choose someone with more wits, if I had any craving for a man. Come now, be off;

you make me sick! . . . I don't care for you; I don't want you. Be off! "

He shook with fury. What did it mean? Had he killed a man for nothing? She was his; he would catch her by the neck and carry her off.

" You're a worthless hussy! " he roared. " All the same, you've got to come. Otherwise I'll settle your hash, as I did his."

La Cognette went at him with her clenched fists.

" Just try! "

He was very strong, broad and tall, and she was quite weak, with her slim figure, her frail, girlish frame. But it was he who retreated; she struck him as so terrible, with her teeth ready to bite, her fixed eyes, that gleamed like knives.

" It's finished—be off! Sooner than go with you, I'd choose never to see a man again. Be off! be off! be off! "

And Tron retired backwards, retreating like some murderous but cowardly beast, yielding to his fear, secretly postponing his revenge. He looked at her, said once more:

" Dead or alive, I'll have your body! "

When he was out of the farm, Jacqueline gave a sigh expressive of relief. Then, turning round, shuddering, without showing any surprise at seeing Jean, she cried in a burst of frankness:

" Oh, the swine! It's I that would set the police on him if I weren't afraid of being run in with him, too! "

Jean felt chilled. With the young woman, also, a nervous reaction set in: she choked, she fell in his arms, sobbing, repeating that she was miserable, miserable—oh, so miserable! Her tears streamed down unceasingly; she wanted to be pitied and loved; it was as though she desired that he should take her away and cherish her. And he was beginning to get extremely bored when the dead man's brother-in-law, the lawyer Baillehache, who had been notified by one of the farm hands, jumped out of his gig into the yard. Then Jacqueline ran to him, and poured out her despair. Jean, who had escaped from the kitchen,

found himself on the shorn plain, beneath the rainy March sky. But he saw nothing, was convulsed by this accident, the shock of which mingled with the pain of his own misfortune. His cup of bad luck was full; a selfish impulse made him hasten his pace in spite of his compassion for the fate of his old master, Hourdequin. It was hardly his province to betray La Cognette and her lover; justice must keep its eyes open. Twice he turned round, thinking that he had been called back, as though he had felt himself an accomplice. It was only when he came to the first houses in Rognes that he breathed freely; and he told himself, now that the farmer was dead of his sin—he pondered on that great truth—that were it not for women, men would be far happier. The memory of Françoise returned to him; he was choked with strong emotion.

When he was once more in the village, Jean remembered that he had gone to the farm to ask for work. He felt suddenly anxious, wondered at what door he could knock now, and the thought occurred to him that the Charles had been wanting a gardener for the last few days. Why should he not offer his services? After all, he was still, to a certain extent, of the family. He betook himself at once to White Roses.

It was one o'clock; the Charles were finishing lunch when the maid-servant introduced him. Élodie was just pouring out the coffee, and M. Charles, having made the cousin take a seat, asked him to have a cup. He accepted, although he had eaten nothing since the day before—his heart was too heavy. Perhaps the coffee would rouse him a bit. But when he was at table with these gentle-folks he no longer had the courage to ask for the post of gardener. Later on, he said, so soon as he should see a chance. Madame Charles had begun to pity him, to lament over the death of that poor Françoise, and he was touched. No doubt the family thought he had come to say good-bye. Then, the maid having announced the Delhommes—father and son—Jean was forgotten.

"Show them in, and bring two more cups."

The Charles had a big affair under weigh since the morning. After leaving the cemetery, Nénesse had accompanied them to White Roses; and when Madame Charles had gone in with Élodie, he had detained Monsieur Charles, had frankly put himself forward as purchaser of No. 19, if they could come to terms. If he was to be credited, the house, which he knew, would be sold for an absurd price; Vaucogne would hardly get five thousand francs for it, he had let it so deteriorate.

Everything would have to be changed; the furniture was worn out, the staff, chosen without any taste, was so inferior that even the military went elsewhere. For nearly twenty minutes he had run down the establishment like this, amazing and confounding his uncle by his knowledge of the game, his skill at bargaining, the extraordinary gifts he displayed considering his youth. Ah, the dog! He was one who would have the eye and the knack of the thing! And Nénesse had said that he would return, after lunch, accompanied by his father, to talk the matter over seriously.

When he went in, M. Charles mentioned it to Madame Charles, who, in her turn, was amazed to find such resources in this lad. If only their son-in-law, Vaucogne, had possessed one half of his capacity! They must play a smart game, or the young man would get the better of them. It was a question of saving Élodie's dowry from disaster. Beneath their fear, however, there was an invincible sympathy—a desire to see No. 19, even at a loss, in the strong and capable hands of a master who would restore its lustre. So that, when the Delhommes entered, they gave them the most cordial welcome.

"You'll have some coffee, won't you? . . . Élodie, pass the sugar."

Jean had pulled his chair back; they were all sitting round the table. Delhomme, newly shaved, his face bronzed and impassive, said nothing, maintained a diplomatic reserve; whilst Nénesse, carefully dressed, with polished shoes, a waistcoat embroidered with golden palms, and a mauve tie, was quite at his

ease, smiling and seductive. When Élodie offered him the sugar basin with a blush, he looked at her, sought for a compliment.

"Your pieces of sugar are very big, cousin."

She blushed still more; she could find no answer, this speech from a presentable young man was so disturbing to her innocence.

In the morning, Nénesse, with great finesse, had only ventured to broach half his business. Since the funeral, where he had seen Élodie, his plan had undergone a sudden development: he would not only have No. 19, but he wanted the young girl as well. The speculation was a simple one. To begin with, he need disburse nothing, he would only take her with the house for dot; then, even if she brought him no more actually than this compromised dowry, she would inherit, later on, from the Charles, a considerable fortune. And it was for this reason that he had brought his father with him, being resolved to make an offer immediately.

For a moment, they talked of the temperature, which was really mild for the season. The pear-trees were in fine blossom; but would the blossom live? They finished drinking their coffee; the conversation died away.

"My pet!" said M. Charles, suddenly, to Élodie, "you might go and take a turn in the garden."

He was dismissing her, being in a hurry to thresh out the subject with the Delhommes.

"Excuse me, uncle!" interrupted Nénesse, "would you be so kind as to let my cousin stay. I want to speak of something which may interest her; and—isn't it so?—it's always best to get a thing over once, than to go into it twice over."

Then he rose and made his offer, like a well brought up young man.

"What I want to say is, that I should be very happy to marry my cousin, if you would give your consent, and if she herself would consent."

The astonishment was great. But Élodie seemed to be especially upset—to such a degree, that she left her chair and threw herself on Madame Charles' bosom, in a confusion of modesty which made her scarlet to the ears; and her grandmother endeavoured in vain to calm her.

"Come, come, my little bird, it's too much; be reasonable now, do! He doesn't want to eat you because he asks you in marriage. Your cousin has said no harm—look at him—don't play the silly!"

But no soft words could induce her to show her face again.

"Gracious me, my lad!" declared M. Charles, at last, "I was not at all expecting this offer of yours. Perhaps it would have been better to speak to me first, for you see how sensitive our darling is. . . . But, whatever happens, you can be assured that I respect you, for you seem to me to be a worthy, hard-working fellow."

Delhomme, who had not hitherto moved a muscle, now let fall two words:

"For sure!"

And Jean, realizing that he must say something polite, added:

"Ah, yes, that he is!"

M. Charles recovered himself, and he had already reflected that Nénesse was not a bad match—young, energetic, the only son of wealthy peasants. His grand-daughter would hardly do better. So, having exchanged a glance with Madame Charles, he continued:

"It's for the child to say. We would never go against her wishes; it shall be as she likes."

Then Nénesse gallantly repeated his offer.

"Cousin, if you would do me the honour and the pleasure. . . ."

Her face was still buried in her grandmother's bosom, but she did not allow him to finish: she accepted with an energetic motion of her head, which she repeated three times, burying her head still deeper. It gave her courage, no doubt, to stop

her eyes up. The company was silent, struck by this haste to say yes. Did she love this lad, then, of whom she had seen so little? Or was it simply that she wanted one, no matter whom, so long as he was good-looking? Madame Charles kissed her hair, smiling and repeating:

"Poor darling! poor darling!"

"Very well!" resumed M. Charles, "since it suits her, it suits us."

But a sudden thought depressed him. His heavy lids fell, he made a gesture of regret.

"Naturally, my good fellow, we must give up the other matter—the matter you proposed to me this morning."

Nénesse looked amazed.

"But why?"

"What? Why? But because—come now—you quite understand . . . we haven't kept her until she was twenty with the Sisters of the Visitation, in order that—in fine, it's impossible!"

He blinked his eyes, screwed up his mouth, wishing to make himself understood, but afraid lest he should say too much. The little one yonder, in the Rue aux Juifs! A young lady who had received such an education! A purity so complete, reared up on an ignorance of everything!

"Oh, I beg your pardon," declared Nénesse, roundly, "that's not what I want. I marry to establish myself, I want my cousin, and the house."

"The confectionery!" cried Madame Charles.

And this word once started, the discussion caught it up, repeated it ten times over. The confectionery! Come now, was it in reason? The young man and his father were firm in exacting the dowry, declared they could not abandon that, it was a real fortune in the future; and they called Jean to witness, and he nodded his chin in agreement with them. Finally, they all took to shouting, forgot themselves, grew precise, and embarked on crude details, when an unexpected incident made them silent.

Just then Élodie had slowly disengaged her head, and she

rose, looking like a lily that had grown up in the shade, with that pale emaciation of anæmic maidens, with her vacant eyes, her colourless hair. She glanced at them and said, tranquilly:

"My cousin is right; we can't give that up."

Madame Charles stammered, in consternation:

"But, my little bird, if you only knew——"

"I know. . . . Victorine told me everything long ago—Victorine, the servant you dismissed, because of the men. . . . I know. I've thought it all over, and I assure you we can't give it up."

The Charles were transfixed—in a stupor. Their eyes grew round, they looked at her in profound bewilderment. What? She knew of No. 19, of what was done there, what was earned—in short, the profession; and she spoke of it with this calmness. Oh, innocence! It can touch everything without blushing.

"We can't give it up," she repeated. "It's too good a thing, it brings in too much. . . . And, besides, a house that you have made, where you've worked so hard—ought it to go out of the family?"

M. Charles was torn asunder. In the midst of his emotion an indefinable sensation was felt, which started from his heart, and gripped him in the throat. He rose, tottering, leant against Madame Charles, who was on her feet, too, choking and tremulous. Both believed in a sacrifice; they refused, in a distracted voice.

"Oh, darling! Oh, darling! No, no, my darling!"

But Élodie's eyes grew moist; she kissed her mother's old wedding-ring, which she wore on her finger—that wedding-ring that had been worn out over there, in the business.

"Yes, yes; let me do as I think best. I want to be like mamma. What she did, I can do. There's no disgrace, since you did it yourselves. I like it very much, I assure you. And you'll see if I won't help my cousin—if we don't work up the house quickly, the two of us. It *must* succeed; you don't know me."

So the thing was carried; the Charles melted. They were swamped by emotion—they sobbed like children. Of course, they had not brought her up with this intention; only what can you do when the blood speaks? They recognized the cry of vocation. It was exactly the same story as it had been with Estelle; her, too, they had shut up with the Sisters of the Visitation, in ignorance, inculcated with the most severe principles of morality; and she had, none the less, become the mistress of a disorderly house. But the largest part of the Charles emotion, the tears which they could not stem, came even more from the glorious thought that No. 19, their work, their flesh, would be saved from ruin. Élodie and Nénesse, with the noble ardour of youth, would carry on their race. And they had a vision of it already, restored, re-established in public favour, brilliant—with that lustre, in short, which it had in Châtres in the fairest days of their reign.

When M. Charles was able to speak, he drew his granddaughter into his arms.

"Your father has given us a heap of trouble, but you console us for everything, my angel!"

Madame Charles embraced her similarly; they made only one group, their tears were mingled.

"Is it a settled affair then?" asked Nénesse, who wanted an engagement.

"Yes, it's settled."

Delhomme beamed, like a father, enchanted at having established his son in a way beyond his hopes. His prudence was shaken, he went so far as to express an opinion.

"Ah, faith! If you don't regret it, we never shall. There's no need to wish the children good luck. When you make money, things always go right."

It was upon this conclusion that they resumed their seats, to talk over the details quietly.

But Jean understood that he was in the way. He himself had felt embarrassed at being present in the midst of these effusions,

and he would have escaped before if he had known how to get out. He finished by taking M. Charles aside; he spoke of the place of gardener. The worthy face of M. Charles grew severe; give a relation a situation with him—never! No good work can be got out of a relative: you can't knock him about. Besides, the place had been filled up the night before. And Jean departed, just as Élodie, in her pure, virginal voice, remarked that if her papa was nasty she would undertake to make him hear reason.

Once outside, he walked on at a slower pace, not knowing where to turn for work. Out of the hundred and twenty-seven francs, he had already paid for his wife's funeral, the cross and grave in the cemetery. Hardly the half of that sum was left; with that he could keep going for three weeks—afterwards he would see. Poverty did not trouble him; his only anxiety was at the idea of leaving Rognes, because of his law-suit. Three o'clock struck, then four, then five. He roamed about the country for a long time, his head buzzing with confused reveries. Now he was back again at La Borderie—now back again with the Charles. Everywhere it was the same story—money and woman—for which one lived and died. It was not surprising, then, if all his trouble sprang from that source. A weakness came over his legs; he remembered that he had not yet eaten. He returned towards the village, having decided to instal himself at Lengaigne's, who had rooms to let. But as he crossed the Place de l'Église, the sight of the house from which he had been driven out that morning fired his blood again. Why should he leave those swine his two pairs of trousers and his best coat? They were his, and he would have them if it cost him a renewal of the fight.

Night was falling; Jean could hardly distinguish old Fouan, seated on the stone bench. He arrived in front of the kitchen door, where there was a candle alight, when Buteau recognised him and rushed out to bar the passage.

"Damnation! It's you again! . . . What do you want?"

"I want my two pairs of trousers and my coat."

A furious quarrel broke out. Jean insisted, asked to look in the cupboard; whilst Buteau, who had caught up a bill-hook, swore to cut his throat if he crossed the threshold. At last, Lise's voice was heard from the interior, crying:

"Oh, give him his rags! You couldn't put them on, they're infected."

The two men were silent. Jean waited. But, behind his back, on the stone bench, old Fouan sat and dreamt, his head wandering; he muttered in his rusty voice:

"You'd better be off! They will murder you, as they murdered the girl!"

It was a revelation. Jean understood everything—both Françoise's death and her obstinate silence. He had been suspicious before; he had no doubt now that she had saved her family from the guillotine. Fear made his hair stand on end, and he could not utter a cry or make a gesture, when he received full in his face the trousers and the coat that Lise hurled at him through the open door.

"There they are, your filthy rags! They stink so that they would have given us the plague!"

Then he picked them up and went away. And it was only when he was on the road, was out of the yard, that he shook his fist at the house, and shouted one single word, which rang through the silence:

"Murderers!"

Then he disappeared in the black night.

Buteau was thunderstruck, for he had heard the sentence murmured dreamily by old Fouan, and Jean's epithet had struck him hard, like a bullet. What now? Would the gendarmes meddle with it, after all, when he had thought the story buried in Françoise's grave? Since he had seen her lowered into the ground that morning, he had breathed freely, and here was the old

man, who knew everything. Had he been feigning stupidity in order to watch them? It put Buteau in an agony; he came in feeling so ill that he left half his plate of soup. Lise, informed of what had occurred, was seized with shivering, and ate no more.

They had both promised to make high festival of this their first night in the reconquered house. It was abominable, a night of misery. They had put Laure and Jules to bed on a mattress in front of the wardrobe until they could instal them elsewhere; and the children were not yet asleep when they went to bed themselves and blew out the light. But it was impossible to close their eyes, they tossed about as if they were on hot iron; they fell to talking, at last, in a low voice. Ah, that father! What a heavy burden he was since he had grown into second childhood! a real charge, more than their backs could bear: he cost so much! It was incredible the amount of bread he gorged; and he was greedy, seizing his meat in both hands, upsetting his wine in his beard, and so dirty that it made your heart sick only to look at him. Besides that, nowadays, he was always unbuttoned, and they had surprised him exposing himself before little girls: it was the mania of an old, exhausted animal, a disgusting end for a man who, in his time, had been no lewder than other people. Honestly, it would be charity to finish him off with a blow from an axe, since he couldn't make up his mind to go of his own accord.

"When one thinks that he'd fall if you so much as breathed on him!" murmured Buteau. "And he lasts; a bloody lot he cares if he bothers us! Those old buggers—the less they earn, the less they care, and the tighter they hang on! He—he'll never die!"

Lise, lying on her back, said in her turn:

"It's wrong that he ever came back here. He's too comfortable, he's got a fresh lease of life. The one prayer I could have prayed the Almighty is, that he hadn't stayed a single night in the house."

Neither of them broached their real terror—the idea that the father knew everything and could betray them, even innocently. That was the climax. That he was an expense, that he was in their way, that he prevented them from the free enjoyment of the stolen bonds—they had long put up with this. But that a word of his should put their necks in jeopardy—ah, no, that was too much of a good thing. That must be arranged.

"I'll go and see if he's asleep," said Lise, suddenly.

She lit the candle, assured herself that Laure and Jules were sound asleep, then glided in her shift into the mangel-wurzel store, where they had once more set up the old man's iron bed. When she returned, she was trembling, her feet were chilled from the tiles, and she burrowed under the bedclothes, pressed herself against her man, who took her in his arms to warm her.

"Well?"

"Well! He's asleep, he's got his mouth open like a carp, because he breathes so badly."

A silence reigned, but however dumb they might be in their embrace, they heard their thoughts pulsing within them. This old man, who was always half-suffocating—how easy it would be to extinguish him. A trifle down his throat, a handkerchief, or only one's fingers—and they would be free of him. It would even be a service to him. Wasn't it better to sleep quietly in the cemetery, than to be a burden on other people and one's self?

Buteau continued to hold Lise tight in his arms. Now they were both burning, as though desire had fired all the blood in their veins. Suddenly he dropped her, and in his turn leapt with his bare feet on the floor.

"I'll go and see, too."

Candle in hand, he disappeared, whilst she listened, holding her breath, her eyes wide open in the darkness. But the minutes glided away, and no sound came to her from the adjoining room. At last she heard him coming back without a light, the faint rustle of his feet; he was so oppressed that he could not

restrain his hoarse breathing. And he advanced to the bed, groped out to find her again, whispered in her ear:

"You come—I dare not, by myself."

Lise followed Buteau, their arms extended for fear of knocking against something. They no longer felt cold; their night-clothes were in their way. The candlestick was on the floor in a corner of the old man's room, but its light was sufficient to enable them to distinguish him lying on his back, his head fallen off the pillow. He was so stiff, so ravaged by old age, that they might have thought him dead had it not been for the painful rattle of the breath issuing from his wide-open mouth. He had no teeth. There was a black hole where the lips seemed to fall in, a hole over which the two bent, as though to discover what was left of life within it. For a long time they gazed, side by side, their flanks touching. But their arms grew limp. It was very easy, and yet so hard, withal, to take, no matter what, and stop up the hole. They went away, came back again. Their parched tongues could not have uttered a word; only, their eyes were speaking. With a glance, she had pointed out to him the pillow. Well, what was he waiting for? He blinked his eyes, pushed her in his place. With a sudden exasperation, Lise grasped the pillow and thrust it over the father's face.

"Cowardly bugger! Must it always be the woman?"

Then Buteau made a rush, leant with all the weight of his body, whilst she mounted on the bed and sat down, pressing with her naked crupper, which was like a dropsical mare's.

It was a mad assault. They both shoved with fists and thighs and shoulders. The father gave a violent start, his legs stuck out with the noise of a spring breaking. It was as though he had given a leap, as a fish does when it is thrown on the grass. But it was not long. They kept it up too roughly; they felt him being flattened beneath them, pouring out his life. A long shudder, a last tremulous motion, and then, nothing—something as limp as a rag.

"I think that's done it," growled Buteau, panting.

Lise, still seated in a heap, ceased moving, just withdrew to see whether any quiver of life responded from the body.

"That's done it—nothing stirs."

She dropped off him, her shift rolled up to her waist, and took away the pillow. They gave a moan of terror.

"S'help me! He's quite black, we're done for!"

In effect, it was impossible to give out that he had put himself in such a state by himself. In the fury with which they had pounded him they had driven his nose into his mouth, and he was purple—a regular nigger. For a moment, they felt the earth totter beneath them; they heard the rush of the gendarmes, the chains of prison, the knife of the guillotine. This badly-performed task filled them with terrified regret. How could they patch him up now? They might scrub him with soap as much as they liked; he would never get white again. And it was their anguish at seeing him this soot colour which inspired them with an idea.

"Suppose we were to burn him," murmured Lise.

Buteau drew a long breath of relief.

"That's it; we'll say he set himself on fire."

Then the thought of the bonds having come to him, he clapped his hands, his whole face brightened in a triumphant laugh.

"Ah! God's truth! that will do; we'll make them believe he's burnt the papers along with him. . . . There'll be no account to render!"

He ran at once to fetch the candle. But she was afraid to start the fire, and at first would not let him bring it near the bed. Some straw swathes were lying in a corner, behind the mangel-wurzels; and she took one, lit it, and began by firing the father's hair and beard, which were very long and quite white. A smell of grease was diffused; it crackled in little, yellow flames. Suddenly, they threw themselves back, gaping, as though a cold hand had drawn them by the hair. In the atrocious suffering caused by the burns, the father, who had not been quite suffocated, opened his eyes, and that fearful black mask, with the

great broken nose, the burnt beard, looked at them. It wore a terrible expression of pain and hatred. Then all the face was convulsed; he died.

Buteau, who was aghast already, gave a roar of fury, as he heard a burst of sobbing at the door. It was the two children, Laure and Jules, in their nightdresses; they had been awakened by the noise, and attracted by the bright light into this room, of which the door was open. They had seen, and howled with fright.

"Damnation, you vermin!" cried Buteau, rushing upon them. "If you chatter, I'll strangle you. Take that, to make you remember!"

With a couple of blows he knocked them on the floor. They picked themselves up without a tear, and ran and stretched themselves on their mattress, where they lay motionless.

Buteau, anxious to have it done, set fire to the bedding, in spite of his wife. Luckily, the room was so damp that the straw burnt slowly. A thick smoke issued from it; they opened the sky-light, in semi-suffocation. Then the flames burst up, and mounted as high as the ceiling. The father crackled within them, and the insufferable stench grew stronger—the stench of burning flesh. All the old building would have blazed like a rick, if the straw had not began to smoulder beneath the bubbling of the body. There was nothing left on the cross-bars of the iron bedstead but this half-consumed corpse, disfigured and irrecognizable. One corner of the mattress had remained intact, a piece of the sheet was still hanging down.

"Let's be off," said Lise, who, in spite of the great heat, was once more shivering.

"Wait," Buteau answered. "We must arrange things."

He set a chair by the pillow, and upset the old man's candle off it, to give the appearance that it had fallen on to the straw. He even had the cunning to burn some paper on the ground. They would find the ashes; he would relate how, on the previous day, the old man had discovered and kept his bonds.

"It's done—to bed!"

Buteau and Lise ran, knocking up against each other, and plunged into their bed. But the sheets were chilly; they caught each other in a fierce embrace to get warm. The day dawned; still they were not asleep. They said nothing; they trembled, and then they could hear each other's heart beat furiously. It was the door of the adjoining room left open which troubled them; the notion of shutting it made them still more nervous. At last they sunk to sleep without letting go of each other. The next morning, at the desperate cries of the Buteaus, the neighbours rushed in. La Frimat and other women witnessed the upset candlestick, the half-consumed mattress, the ashes of some papers. They all declared that it was bound to happen one day: they had predicted it a hundred times—when an old man is in his second childhood. And it was a real bit of luck that the house had not been burnt with him!

CHAPTER VI

Two days later, the very morning when old Fouan was to be buried Jean, worn out with a sleepless night, awoke very late, in the little room which he occupied, at the Lengaignes. He had not yet gone to Châteaudun about the law-suit, the idea of which was all that prevented him from leaving Rognes. Each night he postponed the matter until the next day; and his hesitation increased in proportion as his anger cooled. And it was a last struggle which had kept him feverishly awake, uncertain as to what decision he should come to.

Those Buteaus! They were murderous brutes, assassins, and it would be an honest man's duty to bring them to the guillotine. At the first mention of the old man's death, he had quite understood their evil deed. Great Heavens; to prevent him from talking, the scoundrels had burnt him alive. Françoise, Fouan: having killed the one, they had been compelled to kill the other. Whose turn would it be now? And he remembered that it was his turn; they knew him to be in the secret, they would certainly send a bullet into him, round the corner of some wood, if he persisted in living in the district. Why, then, not denounce them at once? He made up his mind to it; he would go and inform the police of the story, as soon as he was up. Then, he was seized again with hesitation, distrust of this big business in which he would be a witness, fear, lest he should suffer from it as much as the guilty. What was the good of creating fresh worries? Doubtless, it was scarcely courageous, but he had an excuse; he repeated that, in not speaking, he was obeying Françoise's last wish. Twenty times during the night he would, and then would not; this duty, from which he shrunk, made him physically ill.

When, about nine o'clock, Jean lept out of bed, he plunged his head into a bucket of cold water. Suddenly he had resolved upon his course. He would tell nothing, he would not even go to law to recover his half of the furniture. Assuredly the game would not be worth the candle. A feeling of pride restored his self-possession; he was pleased that he was not of them, not one of these rascals, was the stranger. They could devour one another by themselves; a good riddance if they were all swallowed up! All the pain, all the disgust of the ten years he had passed at Rognes flooded up in his breast in a wave of anger. To think that he had been so merry the day when he left the service after the war in Italy, at being no longer a wearer of the sabre, a slayer of men! And since that time he had lived in worry and disagreeables—in the midst of savages. Ever since his marriage he had had a heavy heart, but now they had taken to rob and murder! They were actually wolves, scouring over the plain which was so vast and calm! No, no! It was enough; these ravening beasts had spoilt the country for him. Why should he hunt down a single couple, the male and the female, when he ought to have destroyed the whole band? He preferred to take himself off.

At that moment Jean's eyes fell upon a newspaper which he had carried up the night before from the wine-shop. He had become interested in an article on the ensuing war, those rumours of war which had been circulating to people's alarm for some days past, and something within him, of which he had been ignorant, which had been roused from unconsciousness by the news, was stirred and kindled suddenly, like a flame that had not been quite extinguished. His last reluctance to depart, the thought that he knew not where to go, was borne down by it, swept away, as it were, by a great blast of wind. Why, of course he would go and fight; he would re-enlist! He had paid his debt; but what then? When one has no longer a trade, when one is tired of life, and mad at the assaults of one's enemies, the best thing is to strike out at them. An alleviation,

a sort of sombre joy came to him. He dressed, whistling loudly —the trumpet call which had led him to battle in Italy. People were too infamous; it relieved him, that hope of demolishing the Prussians; and, since he had not found peace at his own hearth, where families ravened after each other's blood, he might just as well return to the life of slaughter. The more he killed the redder would grow the earth, and the more he would feel revenged for that accursed life of pain and misery which men had procured him.

When Jean came down, he ate two eggs and some bacon, which Flore served him. Afterwards, he called Lengaigne, and settled his bill.

"You're going away, Corporal?"

"Yes."

"You're going away, but you'll come back?"

"No."

The inn-keeper looked at him in astonishment, reserving his reflections. So the precious idiot was renouncing his rights.

"And what are you going to do now? I suppose you'll turn joiner again?

"No—soldier."

Lengaigne, his eyes round with stupefaction, could not suppress a laugh of contempt. What a fool!

Jean had already started along the road to Cloyes, when a last emotion brought him to a halt, and made him mount the hill again. He would not leave Rognes without saying farewell to Françoise's tomb. And there was one thing more—his desire to see again for the last time the panorama of the vast plain, sad Beauce, which he had come to love at last, during his long hours of solitary labour.

Behind the church was the cemetery, surrounded by a little wall that had fallen to pieces; it lay so low, that from the midst of the graves one's gaze could wander freely from one end of the horizon to the other. A pale March sun whitened the sky, which was veiled in mist, as delicate as white silk, hardly relieved

with a speck of blue; and beneath this soft light La Beauce, sluggish yet, after the cold of winter, seemed to protract its slumber, like those sleeping women who, while not quite asleep, shrink from stirring in order to revel in their laziness. The distances were dim, the plain seemed to have grown broader, displaying its plots, already green with wheat, and oats, and the rye of autumn; whilst on the ploughed places which had remained bare the spring sowing had begun. Everywhere, in the midst of the rich clods, men were moving, with the same gesture —the continual distribution of the seed. It could be seen clearly, escaping in a gilded shower, as it were living dust, from the hands of the nearest sowers. Then the sowers were dwarfed and lost in infinity; and it enveloped them in a cloud, seemed to be in the distance no more than the mere vibration of the light. Leagues away, at the four points of the boundless expanse, the life of the coming summer was showered down beneath the sunshine.

Jean stood erect in front of Françoise's tomb. It was in the middle of a row, and, beside her, the open grave for old Fouan awaited. The cemetery was over-run with wild grasses; nothing would have induced the municipal council to vote fifty francs to the ranger to have it cleared up. Crosses and enclosures had perished where they stood. A few mildewed stones had withstood; but the charm of this solitary nook was actually its desolation, its profound quietude, only disturbed by the cawing of the aged crows, who wheeled round the point of the steeple. One slept there at the world's end, in all humility and oblivion of all things. And Jean, penetrated with this peace of death, was wrapt in contemplation of vast Beauce, of the sowing which filled it with a tremor of life, when the bell began to ring slowly, three strokes, then two more, then a peal. It was the body of Fouan, which they were carrying out, and which was on its way.

The grave-digger, a cripple, arrived limping, to take a look at the grave.

"It's too small," remarked Jean, who had waited, with some emotion, desirous to see.

"Oh, ay!" replied the lame man, "being roasted has shrivelled him up."

The day before the last the Buteaus had trembled until after Doctor Finet's visit. But the doctor's sole preoccupation was to sign the certificate of death quickly, and save himself trouble. He came, saw, declaimed against the madness of families who leave candles with weak-witted old men; and if he conceived any suspicion he was prudent enough not to express it. Lord! the father was such an obstinate one to live: what if they had roasted him a little? He had seen so much that that went for nothing. In his indifference, a compound of bitterness and contempt, he contented himself with shrugging his shoulders: these peasants were a blackguardly race!

The Buteaus were relieved; they had only now to withstand the contact of the family, which was foreseen and awaited with fortitude. As soon as La Grande appeared, they burst into tears, to keep up appearances. She looked at them in surprise, thinking it showed very little cunning to weep so much; however, she had only run up with an idea of passing the time, for she had no claim on the inheritance. The danger began when Fanny and Delhomme arrived. As it happened, the latter had just been elected mayor in place of Macqueron, and his wife was, in consequence, so swollen out with pride that she was like to burst out of her skin. She had kept her word, her father had died before she had been reconciled with him; and the wound to her susceptibility still bled, so much so that she stood dry-eyed before the corpse. But there was a sound of sobbing—Jesus Christ arrived extremely drunk. He bathed the body in his tears, blubbered out that it was a blow from which he would never recover.

In the kitchen, however, Lise had got ready glasses and some wine; and they conversed. The hundred and fifty francs interest resulting from the sale of the house was disposed of at

once; for it had been agreed that it should go to whichever of the children had kept the father in his last days. Only, there was the nest-egg. Then Buteau told his story, how the old man had recovered his bonds from under the marble top of the cupboard, and how it must have been in looking at them for pleasure during the night that he had set fire to his beard; how, even, they had found the ashes of the papers: people could bear witness to that—La Frimat, La Bécu, and others. During this recital, they all looked at him without at all troubling him; he struck his breast and called the light of day to witness. It was evident that the family knew, and that he was indifferent, so long as they did not bother him and he kept the money. However, Fanny, with her frankness of a proud woman, relieved her feelings, and treated them as thieves and assassins. Yes, they had burnt the father, they had robbed him—it was as plain as a pikestaff! The Buteaus answered with savage abuse, abominable accusations. Oh, so they wanted harm to happen to them! What about the poisoned soup which had almost killed the old man when he was with his daughter? They could say plenty about other people if people said anything about them. Jesus Christ started weeping again, he howled with sorrow at hearing such crimes were possible. God's truth! his poor father! Were there really sons so infamous as to roast their own father? La Grande dropped some words which exaggerated the quarrel, when they were out of breath. Then Delhomme, whom the scene rendered nervous, went and shut the doors and windows. He had for the future his official position to consider, and, for the rest, he was always in favour of reasonable settlements; so he finished by declaring that these were not the sort of things one said. They wouldn't be much for'rader if the neighbours heard. They might go to law, and like enough the honest people would suffer more than the guilty. Everybody was silent; he was right—it was not worth while washing one's dirty linen before the judge. Buteau filled them with fear; the ruffian was capable of ruining them. And there was, besides, at the

bottom of the accepted crime, the voluntary silence they maintained as to murder and theft, that complicity of peasants with the rebels of the country-side, with poachers and those who murder gamekeepers—persons of whom they go in fear and whom they will not betray. La Grande stayed to drink the coffee of the wake; the others departed, rudely, as people leave the house of folk they despise. But the Buteaus laughed at them, once they kept the money, and were certain now not to be tormented. Lise recovered her loud voice, and Buteau was anxious to do things well. He ordered the coffin, repaired to the cemetery to inform himself of the place where the grave was being dug. It must be said that at Rognes, peasants, who loathed each other during their lifetime, had no love of lying side by side when they were dead, but the line of graves is continued: it is all at the mercy of chance; so that when chance has it that two enemies die close upon each other, it gives considerable trouble to the authorities, for the family of the second talk of keeping the body sooner than letting it lie near the first. At it happened, when Macqueron was mayor, he had taken advantage of his position to buy a plot out of the regular order. The unfortunate part of this was that this plot joined that in which Lengaigne's father was buried, and where Lengaigne himself had reserved a place; and since that time the latter had lived in a perpetual fury; his long struggle with his rival was embittered; the notion that his carcass would rot alongside of that brute's carcass, spoilt the rest of his life for him. It was the same sentiment, then, that seized Buteau, when he had inspected the spot set apart for his father. The latter would have Françoise on his left—which was all right; only, as ill-luck would have it, just opposite, on the upper line, was the tomb of the dead wife of Daddy Saucisse, close to which her husband had reserved a corner; so that the scoundrel, when he eventually died, would have his feet over old Father Fouan's head. Could such an idea be supported for a moment? Two old men, who hated each other ever since that dirty trick of the annuity—

and the rogue of the two, the one who had taken the other in, would dance over his head for all eternity! Why, God's truth! If the family had the heart to tolerate it, Daddy Fouan's bones would rise in their coffin against those of Daddy Saucisse. Bubbling over with wrath, Buteau made a furious descent on the *Mairie;* he fell upon Delhomme, to compel him, now that he was master, to select another plot. Then, as his brother-in-law refused to alter the routine—instancing the deplorable example of Macqueron and Lengaigne, he abused him for a sneak and a traitor, shouted out in the middle of the road that he was the only one who was a good son, since the rest of the family didn't care a damn whether the father was easy or not in the ground. He roused the whole village, and went home in indignation.

Delhomme had just been struggling against a graver difficulty. The Abbé Madeline had left two days before, and Rognes was once more without a priest. The experiment of keeping one resident, the costly luxury of a parish, had succeeded so badly that the municipal council had pronounced for the suppression of the credit, and the return to the old state of things, the church to be simply served by the curé of Bazoches-leDoyen. But the Abbé Godard, in spite of the arguments of Monseigneur, swore that he would never take back the Almighty there. He was exasperated at the departure of his colleague, and accused the inhabitants of having half-murdered him, poor man, with the sole object of compelling himself to return. He had already said everywhere that Bécu could ring the bell for Mass till Vesper time next Sunday, when the sudden death of Fouan complicated the situation, which became suddenly critical. A funeral is not like a Mass; it won't keep for later. Delhomme, secretly glad at the chance, with his cunning good sense, took the pains to call personally on the Curé at Bazoches. As soon as the latter saw him his temples swelled, his face grew black, he repulsed him with a gesture, without letting him open his mouth. No, no, no! He would sooner lose his cure! And when he learnt

that it was for a burial, he stuttered with fury. Ah! the heathens, they died on purpose! Ah! they thought in that way he would be obliged to give in. Well, they could go and bury themselves; it was most assuredly not he who would help them to get up to Heaven. Delhomme waited peaceably until the first flood of his wrath was over; then expounded his ideas. It was only to dogs that one refused a little holy-water; the dead couldn't remain on the hands of their family. Finally, he laid stress on personal reasons—the dead man was his father-in-law, the father-in-law of the mayor of Rognes. Come, now; it would be to-morrow, at ten. No, no, no! The Abbé Godard choked and resisted, and the peasant, however he hoped the night would bring him to reason, was obliged to leave without having subdued him.

"I tell you, no!" the priest cried to him, for the last time, at the door. "Don't have the bell rung. . . . No, a thousand times no!"

On the following day Bécu received the order from the mayor to ring the bell at ten o'clock. They would see. Everything was ready at the Buteaus; the bier had been arranged the night before, under the practised eye of La Grande. The room had been cleaned already, there were no traces of the fire, except the father, between his four planks. And the bell was ringing, when the family, which had assembled in front of the house, to take up the body, saw the Abbé Godard arrive up Macqueron's street, breathless with running, and so red and so furious that he was bare-headed, and fanning himself violently with his three-cornered hat, for fear of a stroke. He looked at nobody, but dived into the church, and instantly reappeared in a surplice, preceded by two choir boys, one of whom carried the cross, the other the holy-water vessel. In hot haste, he mumbled rapidly over the corpse; and, without troubling to see whether the bearers were accompanying him with the coffin, he returned to the church, where he started on the Mass, like a hurricane. Clou and his trombone, as well as the two servers, lost their

breath in their efforts to follow him. The family sat in the front seat—Buteau and Lise, Fanny and Delhomme, Jesus Christ, La Grande. M. Charles, who honoured the funeral with his presence, had brought Madame Charles' excuses: she had gone to Châtres, two days before, with Élodie and Nénesse. As for Slutty, she was on the point of coming, when she noticed that three of her geese were missing, and she had gone off to look for them. Behind Lise, the young ones, Laure and Jules, sat motionless, as good as possible, with their arms folded, their eyes black and very big. On the other benches, a number of acquaintances were crowded up—especially women, La Frimat, La Bécu, Cœlina, Flore—in fine, a gathering of which anybody might have been proud. Before the preface, when the curé turned towards his faithful, he opened his arms violently, as if he would flog them. Bécu, in complete intoxication, was ringing the bell all the time.

Upon the whole it was a proper Mass enough, although taken too fast. No one was annoyed; they smiled at the Abbé's wrath, which they thought excusable; for it was natural that he should be sick at his defeat, just as they were all delighted at the victory of Rognes. A jovial satisfaction spread over their features at having got in the last word with the Almighty. They had forced him to bring back his Almighty, indifferent as they were to Him at heart. The Mass over, the holy-water brush was passed from hand to hand, then the procession formed again; the crucifer, Clou and his trombone, the Curé, choking from his haste, the body borne by four peasants, the family, then the tail of the company. Bécu had begun to ring again, so fiercely that the crows in the steeple flew out with caws of distress. They came to the cemetery at once; they had only to turn round the corner of the church. The chaunts and the music rose more sonorously, in the midst of the great silence, beneath the mist-veiled sun, which warmed the quivering peace of the wild grasses. And thus, bathed in the fine air, the coffin seemed suddenly to become of such small dimensions that everybody was struck by it. Jean,

who had waited there, was touched. Ah, poor old man, so shrivelled up by age, so reduced by the misery of life, he could lie at ease in this toy-box, a little box, not that long! He would not take up much room, nor too much encumber that earth, the vast earth, for which a single passion had burnt him till his sinews had worn away. The body had reached the edge of the gaping hole; Jean's gaze, which followed it, went further, beyond the wall, from one end to the other of La Beauce. And along the expanse of ploughed fields, he found the sowers again, with their incessant gesture, as far as his eye could reach—the living shower of seed, which rained down upon the open furrows. The Buteaus, when they perceived Jean, exchanged a glance of uneasiness. Had the bugger come to wait for them there, and create a scandal? As long as they knew him to be in Rognes they would not sleep in peace. The choir boy, who bore the cross, had just planted it at the foot of the grave, whilst the Abbé Godard, standing over the coffin, which had been set on the grass, quickly recited the last prayers; but the mourners had their attention distracted by noticing Macqueron and Lengaigne, who had arrived late, persistently gazing across the plain. Everyone looked that way, and was interested by a thick smoke which poured up into the sky. It must be at La Borderie. One would have said some ricks were on fire behind the farm.

"*Ego sum* . . ." the Curé recited, savagely.

The faces were turned to him again, the eyes were fixed once more on the body, and M. Charles, alone, continued in a low voice the conversation he had started with Delhomme. He had received a letter from Madame Charles that morning. He was in a state of rapture. They had scarcely disembarked at Châtres before Élodie came out amazingly, showed herself as clever and energetic as Nénesse. She had been too much for her father; she had got hold of the house already. Wasn't it a gift? The eye, the hand? And M. Charles grew pathetic over his old age: happy henceforward in his estate of White Roses, where his collection of rose-trees and pinks had never been more flourishing,

and where the birds in his aviary had been cured and resumed their singing, the sweetness of which stirred his soul.

"*Amen!*" said the choir-boy, who carried the holy-water, in a loud voice.

The Abbé Godard went on at once, in his angry voice:

"*De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine. . . .*"

And he continued, whilst Jesus Christ, who had drawn Fanny aside, fell again savagely on the Buteaus.

"The other day, if I hadn't been so drunk. . . . But it's too stupid to let them rob us like that."

"Let them rob us? . . . they have robbed us!" murmured Fanny.

"For you know," he went on, "those swine have got the bonds. . . . They've had the benefit of them a long time; they came to an agreement with Daddy Saucisse, I know that! Damn it—aren't we going to spring a law-suit on them?"

She withdrew from him, refused sharply.

"No, no, not me! I've enough of my own business. . . . You can, if you like."

Jesus Christ made, in his turn, a gesture of fear and resignation. If he could not put his sister forward, he did not feel sure enough of his personal relations with the law.

"Oh, me! People fancy such things. . . . No matter, when one's straight, one's rewarded by being able to hold one's head up."

La Grande, who was listening, watched him draw himself up with the worthy air of an honest man. She had always accused him of being a simpleton, with all his blackguardism. It gave her a feeling of pity to think that such a big ruffian didn't go and smash up things at his brother's, to get his share. And, just to mock at him and Fanny, she repeated her customary promise to them, without any transition, as though the subject had dropped from the clouds.

"Ay, to be sure, I shan't do any wrong to anyone. The paper is all ready, this many a day; and everyone has his share; I

shouldn't die in peace if I had given anyone an advantage. Hyacinthe is in it, and you too, Fanny. . . . I'm ninety years old. It will come, it will come some day! "

But she did not believe a word of it, resolute not to come to an end, in her obstinate lust of possession. She would bury them all. Here was one more, her brother, whose departure she saw. All that was done there, the corpse carried along, the open grave, the last ceremony, might have been for her neighbours, not for her. Tall and lean, her stick under her arm, she stood there in the midst of the tombs, without a trace of emotion, merely with a sort of curiosity at that need to die which came to other folks.

The priest gabbled the last verse of the Psalm:

" *Et ipse redimet Israel ex omnibus iniquitatibus ejus.*"

He took the brush out of the holy-water vessel and sprinkled the coffin; then, raising his voice:

" *Requiescat in pace.*"

" *Amen,*" responded the two choristers.

And the coffin was lowered down. The grave-digger had attached the ropes: two men were sufficient, it did not weigh more than the body of a little child. Then the defile past was resumed; the holy-water brush was passed once more from hand to hand; each person waved it, with the sign of the cross, over the grave.

Jean, who had approached, received it from the hand of M. Charles, and his eyes sought the bottom of the hole. He was quite dazzled from his long gaze over wide Beauce, at the sowers dropping in the bread that was to be, from one end to the other of the plain, as far as the luminous haze on the horizon, where their figures were lost. In the earth, however, he could distinguish the coffin, which looked smaller still with its narrow lid of pine-wood, yellow-coloured, like corn; and the rich clods of earth slipped down and partly covered it: he could see no more than a pale blot, like a handful of that corn which his comrades were casting into the furrows down yonder. He waved the holy-water brush, handed it to Jesus Christ.

"Your Reverence! Your Reverence!" called Delhomme, discreetly. He ran after the Abbé Godard, who, the ceremony once over, had gone off at a tempestuous pace, forgetting his two choristers.

"What now?" asked the priest.

"It's to thank you for your kindness. . . . On Sunday, then, we'll ring the bell for the nine o'clock Mass, as we're accustomed to, shan't we?"

Then, as the Curé looked at him fixedly, without answering, he hastened to add:

"We've a poor woman here who's very ill and quite alone, without a farthing. . . . Rosalie, the chair-mender. You know her. I've sent her some soup, but I can't do everything."

The face of the Abbé Godard was relaxed, a shiver of moved charity dissipated its crossness. He fumbled in his pockets despairingly, could find no more than seven sous.

"Lend me five francs, I'll repay you on Sunday. Until Sunday."

And he went off, choking with his fresh haste. No doubt, the Almighty, Whom they had compelled him to bring back, would send them all to fry in Hell, those damned souls of Rognes; only, what then? That was no reason for letting them suffer too much in this life.

When Delhomme returned to the others, he dropped into the thick of a furious quarrel. At first, the mourners had been absorbed in watching the shovelfuls of earth, which the gravedigger threw upon the coffin. But as chance willed it, by the side of the grave, Macqueron found himself shoulder to shoulder with Lengaigne, and the latter had soundly rated the other on the subject of the burial plots. And the family, who were ready to depart, remained, became absorbed, too, in the battle, which was accompanied by the deep and regular noise of the shovelfuls of earth.

"You hadn't the right," cried Lengaigne. "It's all very fine being mayor, but you ought to keep to the right order; and it

was only to annoy me that you've gone and fixed yourself by my dad! But, damn it, you're not there yet! "

Macqueron answered:

" Let me alone! I've paid my money, and I'm at home. And I'll go there, and it won't be a dirty blackguard of your kidney who'll prevent me."

Both had hustled each other, until they came in front of their concessions, the few feet of earth in which they were to sleep.

" But, you bloody sneak, don't you care at all whether our corpses are to be neighbours, like a couple of real friends? Why, it makes my blood boil! Are we to have fought all our life, and then make peace down below, and lie calmly side by side? No, no! No making up, not for me! "

" A blasted lot I care! I've had too much of you all along to bother myself because you're rotting in my neighbourhood."

This contempt gave the last touch to Lengaigne's exasperation. He stammered out that, if he died last, he would sooner go in the night and dig up Macqueron's bones. And the other was answering, with a sneer, that he should like to see him do it, when the women interfered. Cœlina, dark and lean and furious, went against her husband.

" You're in the wrong, I've told you so, and you've no heart. If you're obstinate, you can lie there by yourself, in your hole. I'll lie somewhere else; *I* won't be poisoned by that drab."

With a shake of her chin she designated Flore, who whimpered in her fatness, and had no intention of being bullied.

" You should know which would hurt the other. Don't get riled, my beauty! I've no wish to get some blasted disease from your corpse."

La Bécu and La Frimat interfered to separate them.

" Come, come! " repeated the former, " since you're agreed, since you won't be together! . . . Everybody has their own notions; they're free to choose their own company."

La Frimat approved.

" To be sure, it's only nature. . . . That's so with my old

man, who's dying; I'd sooner keep him than let him lie by Daddy Louillon—many's the words they've had together, in their day! "

Tears rose to her eyes at the thought that her paralytic would not perhaps last the week. Last night, when she wanted to put him to bed, she had fallen down with him, and when he was gone she would be quick to follow him.

But Lengaigne suddenly turned to Delhomme, who had just returned:

" Look here, you're a straight man—make him shift from there, and take his turn with the rest of us! "

Macqueron shrugged his shoulders, and Delhomme agreed that once the former had paid his money, the ground belonged to him. It mustn't occur again, that was all. Then Buteau, who had endeavoured to keep calm, was carried away. The family had maintained a certain reticence. The thick thuds of the earth still sounded upon the old man's coffin. But his indignation was too strong for him; he shouted to Lengaigne with a gesture, designating Delhomme:

" Ah, yes! I daresay you expect that chap to understand a man's feelings. He's gone and buried his father beside a thief! "

It was a scandal. The family took sides: Fanny supported her man, saying the real mistake was that when their mother (Rose) died they hadn't bought a plot near her for the father, whilst Jesus Christ and La Grande heaped abuse on Delhomme —they too being revolted by the neighbourhood of Daddy Saucisse, as by an inhuman thing which nothing could excuse. M. Charles was of the same opinion, but expressed himself with moderation.

They had reached a point where they could not hear each other speak, when Buteau, dominating their voices, bellowed out:

" Yes, their bones will rise in their graves and destroy each other."

In a moment, everyone—relations, friends, acquaintances were mixed up in it. That was right; he had said it: their bones

would rise in their graves. Amongst them, the Fouans seemed likely to annihilate each other; Lengaigne and Macqueron would quarrel over it till they rotted; the women—Cœlina, Flore, La Bécu—would make the discussion venomous with their tongues and claws. One couldn't lie quietly, even in one's grave, with a person one loathed; and in that sun-bathed cemetery it seemed as though beneath the wild grass there was from coffin to coffin a weird, unceasing battle between those old dead, the same battle which waged amongst the living round those graves.

But a cry from Jean separated them, made them turn their heads.

"La Borderie is on fire!"

There was no longer any possible doubt, the flames darted from the roof, looking pale and tremulous in the daylight. A big cloud of smoke floated gently northwards. And, just then, they saw Slutty running up from the farm, at a gallop. In seeking her geese she had noticed the first sparks, and had enjoyed the spectacle until the notion of being the first to tell the thing had sent her running off. She jumped straddle-legged on to the little wall, and shouted, in her shrill, immature voice:

"Oh, isn't it burning! It's that great rascal, Tron, who came back to set it on fire—in three places: in the barn, in the stable, and in the kitchen. They caught him as he was setting light to the straw, and the waggoners almost murdered him. And, I say, the horses, and cows, and sheep, are all roasting. Oh! you should hear them bellowing! I've never heard such bellowing!"

Her green eyes sparkled; she burst into a laugh.

"And La Cognette! You know, she's been ill since the master's death. Well, they forgot her in her bed. She was beginning to fry, and only had time to get away in her shift. Oh! it was funny, to see her trotting over the fields on her naked nine-pins. She jigged about, and showed her behind and her front, and people yelled 'Ho, ho!' to make her behave herself,

for she's not loved. One old man said, 'She leaves as she came, with nought but her shift.'"

A fresh fit of laughter made her wriggle about.

"Come and see; it's too funny. I'm going back."

M. Charles, Delhomme, Macqueron, almost all the peasants, followed her; whilst the women, headed by La Grande, also left the cemetery, and came on to the road, in order to get a better view. Buteau and Lise remained, and the latter stopped Lengaigne, desirious to question him, without appearing to do so, on the subject of Jean. Had he found work, then, as he was stopping in the neighbourhood? When the inn-keeper answered that he was leaving, going to re-enlist, Lise and Buteau, feeling a great weight taken off them, uttered the same expression:

"What an idiot!"

It was finished; they were going to begin to live happy again. They cast a glance at Fouan's grave, which the grave-digger had nearly filled up. And, as the two children lingered watching, the mother called them.

"Come along, Jules, Laure! And be good, and do as you're told, or the man will come and put you in the ground, too."

The Buteaus departed, driving the children in front of them. They knew, and had a very wise air with their great, black eyes, profound and silent.

No one was left in the cemetery but Jean and Jesus Christ. The latter, disdaining the spectacle, was satisfied with watching the conflagration at a distance. He stood motionless between two graves; his gaze was plunged in reverie, his whole face, of the crucified, of the drunkard, expressed the ultimate melancholy of all philosophy. Perhaps he was thinking that life ends in smoke. And, as serious ideas always greatly excited him, he finished by lifting his thigh, unconsciously, in the dimness of his reverie. He let one, he let two, he let three.

"God's truth!" said Bécu, drunkenly, as he crossed the cemetery on his way to the fire.

A fourth, as he passed, brushed him so nearly that he thought he could feel the explosion on his cheek. Then as he went off, he shouted to the comrade:

"If that wind holds, we'll see something fall."

Jesus Christ, with a thrust, felt himself.

"Right, anyhow. . . . I'm dying to bog."

And, with his heavy legs stuck apart, he hurried off, disappeared round the corner of the wall.

Jean was alone. Far away, La Borderie was consumed; there was only a mass of reddish smoke mounting from it, eddying round, casting clouds of shadow over the ploughed fields and the scattered sowers. And he brought his eyes slowly to his feet, looked at the lumps of fresh earth beneath which Françoise and old Fouan were sleeping. His anger of the morning, his disgust with persons and things were gone, lost in a profound feeling of calm. He felt, in spite of himself, perhaps because of the bland sunshine, invaded by gentleness and hope.

Ah, yes, his master, Hourdequin, had given himself infinite trouble with new inventions, had derived very little good from his machines and his manures, and all that science that was still so ineffectively employed. Then La Cognette had come to finish him off; he, too, slept in the cemetery; and nothing was left of the farm but its ashes, which were borne away on the wind. But what did it matter? The walls might burn: the earth they could not burn. The earth, the nursing-mother, would be there always, and would nourish those who should sow in her. She had space and time, and still she gave forth wheat in the meantime, until the day came when man should know how to make her bring forth more.

It was as in those stories of revolution, those political overthrows that men told of. The soil, they said, would pass into other hands, the harvests of far-away lands would come to crush our own; in our fields there would be only weeds. And what then? Can one do the earth any harm? It will, nevertheless, belong to somebody who will be compelled to cultivate it unless

he wish to die of hunger. If, for a period of years, worthless weeds spring from it, that will rest it, it will become once more young and fertile. The earth has no part in the quarrels which rack us like angry insects; it takes no more thought of us than of the ants—it is the great toiler, eternally at its task.

There was grief there, too, blood and tears, all the agonies and revolts of man—Françoise slain, Fouan slain, infamy triumphant, the sanguinary and corrupt vermin of the villages dishonouring and devouring the earth. Only, did one know? Even as the frost which lays waste the harvest, the hail which cuts it down, the lightning which blasts it, are, perhaps, necessary, it is possible that blood and tears are needful to keep the world going. What does our unhappiness weigh in the vast mechanism of the stars and the sun? The Almighty does but make a jest of us. We win our bread only by a terrible duel, day by day. And the earth alone rests immortal, the mother, from whom we spring and to whom we return; she whom we love to the verge of crime, who is ever calling fresh life into being, for her unknown end, even out of our abominations and our misery.

For a long time this confused reverie, hardly formulated as it was, floated in Jean's brain. But a trumpet sounded in the distance, the trumpet of the fire-brigade of Bazoches-le-Doyen, which came up at a gallop, too late. And at that sound he drew himself suddenly up. It was war coming through the mist—war, with its horses, its cannons, its clamour of slaughter. A sudden emotion choked him. Ah, Lord help him! Since he had no longer the heart to work for her, he would defend her, the old soil of France. He was leaving, when, for the last time, he let his gaze stray from the two graves, bare of grass, to the endless tilth-land of Beauce, which the sowers, with their monotonous gesture, were fertilizing. There was death, and seed-time, and the earth brought forth her fruits.

THE END

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